

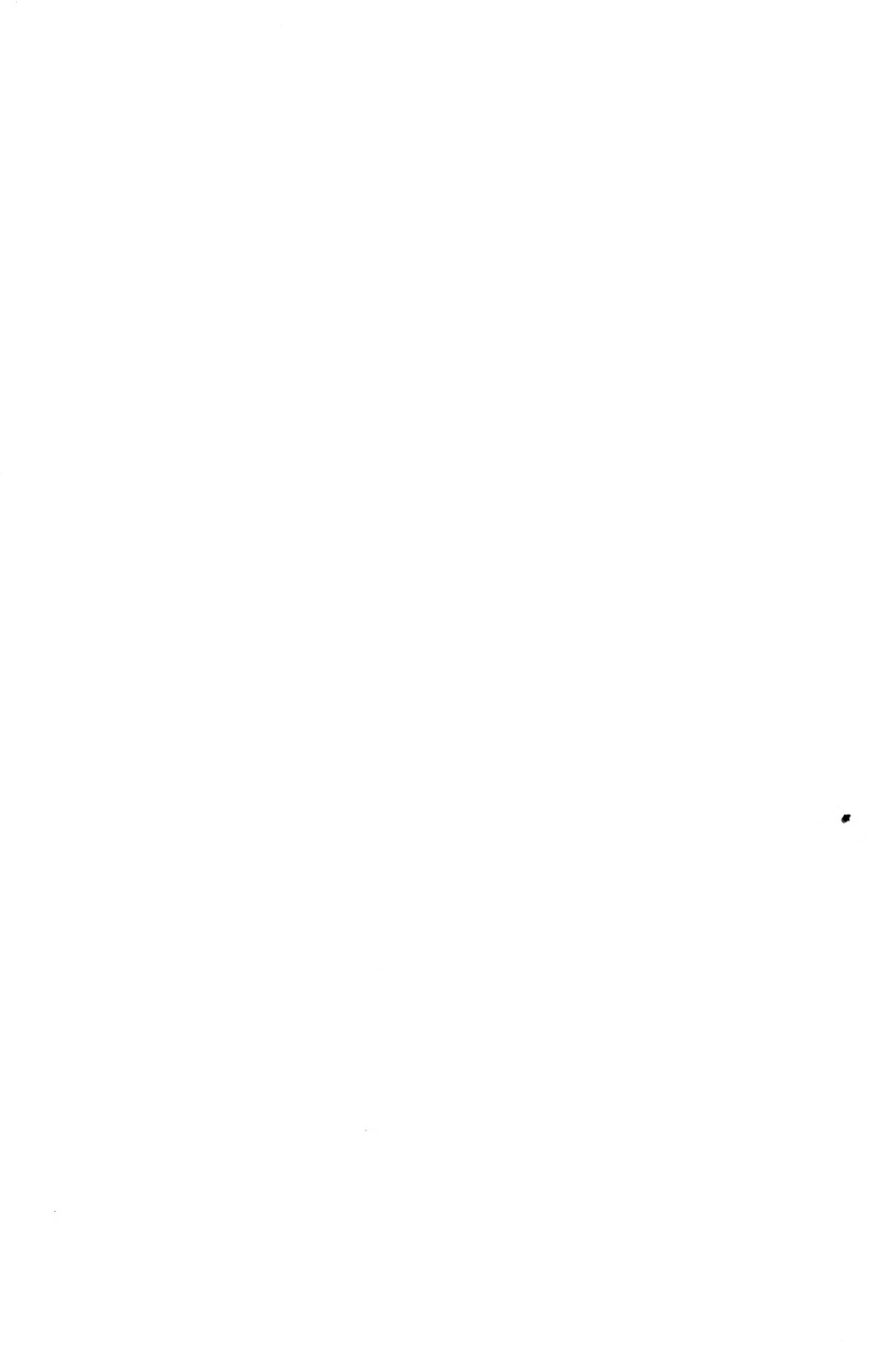




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A BRILLIANT WOMAN



BRILLIANT OMAN

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"THE MARCH VIOLET," "SARA," "LOVE IN A GERMAN VILLAGE,"

"A DUTCH COUSIN," ETC., ETC.

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A BRILLIANT WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

“CAN YOU GIVE ME NO REASON?”

BEFORE Mrs. Burlington had left her room Mr. Horace Wyncote called to inquire for her. So, it may be added, did other people. Mr. Burlington surveyed the Wyncote card with a feeling of dismay; but no feeling of dismay or otherwise altered the fact. The acquaintance was made, and could not be unmade. The best of us are self-tormentors, and make a good deal of unnecessary misery for ourselves. Poor Cyril Burlington made himself very unhappy about this visit. He was sufficiently acquainted with his wife's character now to know that a direct command would

not answer; and he doubted his influence over her if he exerted it. She would obey his command and resent it, and if he tried another way—she would laugh him to scorn. He had grown to dread her way of laughing at what was generally very real earnest to him.

Some women, he had heard, shed tears on slight provocation. That must be trying to see; but could it be worse than the sort of prolonged hysterical laughter which so plainly said that there existed no sympathy between him and his life's companion?

Aunt Anne was of no assistance to him just now, because she took so different a view of the position of things. Never was a man—anxious to act for the best, and thinking of his wife's welfare (not of his own)—more completely at a loss! He ventured to say a few words to his wife the first day she was once more in her sitting-room, and, though lying on the sofa, evidently recovering her usual health

and spirits; and when he had said them he was not sure what he had gained by them.

"The man who picked you up the other day, Mr. Horace Wyncote, called to ask how you were to-day."

"That was kind. Cyril, I wish you would tell me what is wrong? I am sure Mr. Wyncote has done nothing to hurt any one; I never saw any one I thought more winning."

"Things are not always easy to explain. I wish you would do one thing to please me. I wish you would not carry this acquaintance further. Let it drop."

"Why?"

"Because it is unfortunate altogether."

"So I understand you think; but cannot you give me one single reason? You expect me to make my acquaintances, to form my friendships, altogether on your lines; to see with your eyes, to be guided by your wishes, to act by your advice blindly, in a

way no woman can do. You never give a reason. You expect a slavish submission. Yes, Cyril! you put me—or, rather, you try to put me—in the position of a slave, not in that of a wife!”

“If the reasons are those I cannot give,” he said in a low voice, moved by her reproaches.

“That is absurd; you must have some reason. Do you know what you drive me to think, Cyril?”

He looked earnestly at her, and she answered his look.

“I sometimes think that a disgraceful secret connected with some one very near to you has to be concealed at any cost.” She expected to see a look of anger and reproach, but she saw nothing of the kind.

He had grown a little paler, all unknowingly. Were her surmises not just? But, though they were so in one sense, it would be misleading her to agree to them as she meant them, and, though it would have smoothed difficulties for him, he could not do this.

"You may surmise or think what you like, I cannot explain. I have asked you to accept my wish as a reasonable woman; if you have no confidence in me—if you cannot trust me——"

She was surprised by his taking her inquiry so much to heart. As he put it, what could she say?

She lay silent. So much she conceded, but she was too truthful to give assurances which were untrue; and she revolved it all in her mind.

He imagined that he had convinced her, and was pleased that the matter had ended so quietly.

As she lay there, the shaded light near her made her features almost invisible, while his were in fuller light. She watched his countenance, and it struck her that he looked careworn and tired. Prompted more by womanly thought than any affection she asked him whether he was well. "You look tired. Have you been busy to-day? What have you been doing?"

"I have had a tiring day."

"Ah, I suppose I must not inquire further?" she said, with a tinge of mockery.

"It would not interest you—a magistrates' meeting."

"Is it at these meetings that people are hanged?" asked his wife.

"Good heavens! what a question," he exclaimed. "I suppose you are turning it into ridicule as usual."

"I know they are not hanged there and then, but you settle then if they are to be hanged or not, do you not?"

"No," he said shortly.

"Then what do you do for so many hours, with nothing exciting to talk about?"

He could not bear the light way in which she spoke. It jarred upon him, especially just now, because of a terribly sad story he had been obliged to listen to that day.

"I am growing so stupid lying here," she said,

"that if I do not get out soon I shall be almost ready to hang myself."

"Rather strong language, is it not?" he said curtly.

"You see if I do not use strong language you never listen to me," she said with some asperity.

"That is a mistake."

"It is no mistake. When I was talking to you at first you looked bored; then you looked at the fire; then you went into a day-dream. You never listened or cared till I said something startling, something that displeased you."

"I am sorry," he said gravely, realising that she was tired of her invalid life, and a little remorseful because so much truth lay in her accusation.

"It does not matter," she added, after a pause, during which she half expected and half hoped that he would say a few words showing some interest in her recovery—a wish at any rate to see her downstairs again. But Cyril said nothing, and Maria, who

had been making many resolutions, and who was conscious of shortcomings in the past, felt chilled by his silence.

Even in strong health she missed the affectionate flatteries of her aunt, the adulation of her girl friends, the companionship and life of a large party. In sickness she missed them all still more. Now she had been lying on her couch, and feeling unusually low, and very sorry for herself, and a dread had seized her that her life might be all as completely empty of those things she cared for. She saw a long vista of years stretching out into an interminable length, and Cyril cold, critical, unsympathetic. She shivered a little. Her husband was good. Of course he was good; but if he was in love with her, passionately in love, why had he always judged her, and judged her severely? For this, her instinct told her, was the case.

"Cyril," she said suddenly, so suddenly as to make him start, "may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"I often wonder and I want to know, Why did you marry me?"

Cyril looked at her in blank amazement. What was he to say? He had never professed violent love for her, and he had no idea how violent his love had been represented to her.

"I suppose that I hoped, as you did, to lead a happy life together."

"That is no answer. People in love do not hope; they feel quite sure. Were you very much in love with me?"

"I—I suppose so." The unfortunate man was fairly driven into a corner. What had taken hold of her imagination now, and possessed her to put these questions?

"I sometimes think that people lied to me. Cyril, I was told——" Then a swift remembrance came to her. The affection he had been credited with had hardly weighed with her. What did weigh was the wish

to conquer one she was told could not be conquered. He might admire her, he might be desperately in love; but marry her—never! He was not a marrying man. He was quite out of her reach; and she had determined to win him, and she had triumphed. What had resulted from such a triumph?

He watched her curiously, wondering what agitated her.

"I think I have been here long enough," he said, rising and patting her head in a way that made her feel like a chidden child, and yet he meant it kindly. "You are talking too much and exciting yourself."

His firm steps died away down the long passage, and Maria covered her face in her hands.

Hot, scalding tears came to her unaccustomed eyes. "All my life, and I am so young!" she whispered to herself, full of intense self-pity. Cyril was glad that Aunt Anne was coming to dine, and keep him company. Nothing puzzled him more

than the variable moods of his wife. Of course, this last conversation was the outcome of her fall and her bruises, her sprained shoulder, and all the rest of the trouble of that accident.

But the question put to him had gone to his heart, and a misgiving crossed his mind. She had said "people lied to me." Had they lied to him also, and to what end? He had been assured that she loved him—was it also a lie?

Since their marriage she had never shown any affection. She was generally pleasant, sometimes particularly gay—fitful latterly, but he had been glad that her affection for him was not of a demonstrative kind. He would have felt that he had done her a great wrong if it had been so; and if she gave more than he could give in return.

All the same, no man likes having been in any way coerced, and if her love was not very great he had been dealt with unfairly. What thought had stopped her when she had begun that sentence,

and who had lied to her? At any rate, just now, when the doctor had feared that her injuries were serious, he could say no more to her. She was recovering, but she was not herself. And when she was quite well—What use was there in going back to preliminaries? They were to be together as long as they lived. He was too old for romance. He had outlived all those vague dreams and hopes and wishes. They would jog on harmoniously in time, and he would be patient, and not expect too much.

Cyril Burlington entirely forgot that at his wife's age romance was not dead; and, indeed, when does it die? Are there not instances of real pure love and unbounded devotion at all ages and in all circumstances. Sometimes we see it outlive the daily cares and anxieties of married life, and throwing a lovely light over old age—outliving, indeed, the loss of personal beauty and attractiveness, and everything a shallow world imagines necessary to maintain it.

But Cyril Burlington knew really nothing of it. He had gone his own way all his life very calmly and quietly, and had been accustomed to gaze with some astonishment at the evidence of passion and deep affection in others. Indeed he was conscious of feeling a little superior to those swimming in a turbulent stream, and to acknowledge with some gratitude that he was really very much better off than they were. Now he was quite as thankful, perhaps, but he did not like the idea of having been told a lie. And once more he asked himself what had been the reason of it?

What object had Mrs. Kingson in arranging this marriage, if she had arranged it?

And to this enquiry he could bring no satisfactory answer. He pushed reflections aside, and dressed quickly, for Aunt Anne was coming to dinner, and she must not see that anything was wrong.

CHAPTER II.

THE LIGHT OF OTHER DAYS.

IT looked like old times to Mr. Burlington when he and Aunt Anne sat down to dinner, with no brilliant third to divert attention to herself. Like old times, with a difference. Maria was one of the women who most thoroughly understood arranging and ordering a dinner, and, though Mr. Burlington professed to be indifferent about his dinner, he was quite alive to the immense improvement his wife had effected in that direction.

The proverb about the dinner of herbs does not provide for the careless cooking of those herbs, and

where the mistress is indifferent—and some women count it a merit to be indifferent—the cook very naturally takes advantage.

While carefully remembering Cyril's especial tastes Miss Burlington had always been quite content to allow Mrs. Butt to propose what she liked to make, and seldom objected to anything.

In the hands of young Mrs. Burlington this was all altered, and Mrs. Butt, who, during the first month, frequently determined to give up her place, ended by thoroughly respecting a mistress who understood what had gone wrong, and where the fault lay. She began to take far more interest in the perfection of her sauces and flavourings when she found that her efforts were appreciated, and to take infinitely more pains, as no mistake was slurred over.

Maria's energetic temperament was of use in all the household arrangements, and, as Aunt Anne noted the many small signs of improvement which

she was too generous not to admire openly, Cyril agreed with her. All men should care, and almost all do care, for refinement in detail, and as they are helpless when a women really directs household matters, she has to exert the power of two minds, and face difficulties because of the real importance of results. It would be a great shock to many affectionate wives if they knew the truth, that ill-health, bad temper, indigestion, want of sleep, and all else, lie at the door of their ignorance, carelessness, or worse.

In answer to Aunt Anne, Cyril said, absently, "I agree with you. Things are somehow better done. The servants take more pains, I suppose."

"They know that they have a master mind to deal with," said Aunt Anne, pleasantly. "Do you know, Cyril, I find something fresh to admire every time I see your wife? She is always the same, and yet each time I find a new virtue. She knows so much about gardening. I fancied that she had lived

too much in London to know much about flowers, but she knows really a great deal more than I do."

Cyril assented with a vague murmur. He was conscious of being able to admire a great deal, and to feel ungracious and ungrateful, and yet he missed in his wife and his home life what he had always looked forward to.

There was no real confidence between them, and there can be none without affection.

If the outlook was dreary to Maria, it was almost worse for her husband, as he knew much she did not know which pointed to disagreeables in the future. In this chaotic world we often obtain what we do not much care for, and we do not get what we do especially want. If Cyril Burlington had been asked what he most disliked, he would have answered, any scandal; any stories about his family and his name. Now, how long could he feel sure of keeping clear of this?

Oppressed by his thoughts, and feeling that he

was rousing affectionate anxiety in his aunt's mind, he said, suddenly: "I forget if you understand that my candidature is at an end."

"Can you explain to a non-political person like myself what reasons you have for not going on with your election?"

"I am acting on advice."

"But whose, my dear Cyril?"

"The political friends who have just been here."

"And you go entirely by their advice? You are sure it is disinterested?"

"Positive," he answered, with a faint smile. "If I stood, if I won, I should be on their side. There is no doubt that their advice is disinterested enough."

"Are you much disappointed, my dear?"

"Every man has an ambitious dream occasionally. But I am convinced that they are right. Aunt Anne," he said, suddenly, "why should I fence with you, or try to conceal the truth from you? In one way, giving it up is a great relief to me."

If I had gone on—if I had stood—the opposition candidates were prepared to carry placards with a ballet-girl. It would have been terrible for her—for us both.”

“My dear Cyril!”

“The day of that meeting she heard some one say something about a dancing girl.”

“Good heavens! and then . . .”

“She imagined that it referred to her dancing here, and blamed herself. I let her think so. You would have me tell the truth?”

“Not at that moment, perhaps. But oh! if I could convince you how far, far better it would be if you could bring yourself to tell her the exact truth. I do think it cruel and unfair putting her in a false position. It will lead to many unforeseen complications in the end.”

“I cannot do it! I cannot claim her gratitude and pose before her as having been generous. As it is——”

He stopped, and walked away for a moment. Loyalty to his wife stopped the words upon his tongue. How confess that he had married without affection, and that he had begun to doubt hers! That he had been flattered and misled, and that he had discovered that he had been deluded and even lied to? He turned round after a few moments, and his countenance betrayed agitation. Miss Burlington's heart ached for him. She had deemed that his marriage had brought him happiness. Had she been wrong throughout?

But before she had time to collect her thoughts her nephew had plunged into an amusing account of a farmer's marriage, a subject in which she was interested, as he was an old tenant. After dinner a message came from Mrs. Burlington that she wanted them both to have coffee in her sitting-room with her. They rose and went upstairs.

Mr. Burlington was surprised to see the affectionate greeting between his wife and Aunt Anne,

noting the smiling eyes and lips which had never smiled quite in the same way upon him.

"Here I am with a crippled leg and a maimed shoulder. I hope you had a pleasant little dinner," Maria said, affectionately, kissing Aunt Anne, and extending one hand to her husband.

"It is too late to say 'Good morning'. Shall we say 'Good evening'?" she continued, looking calmly at Cyril; "shall I add, have you used somebody's soap, to make it all quite complete?"

In this way she let Aunt Anne know, as she wished to do, that she wanted to make her question her.

"Have you not met before?" asked Aunt Anne, very innocently, in great surprise.

"Of course we have; but Cyril was so much occupied in giving me advice and scolding me that he never thought of saying 'Good morning'. I am conventional, and I like the attention, even knowing it to be meaningless."

Poor Aunt Anne felt helplessly bewildered, and her answer was a very indefinite murmur.

"County business" was all that was heard of that murmur.

"I find it very dull lying here, and I am going to ask one or two friends to come and stay with me," said Maria, with a quick glance at her husband's face.

"Are you, my dear? That is a good plan. Your aunt, perhaps, would come."

Cyril said nothing.

"Oh, I am not thinking of my aunt. She could not come. I mean girl friends of mine. Of course I would far rather have men, but men are at a discount here. One is not supposed to speak to any man under a hundred."

"I fancy, as you are laid up with your unfortunate knee, that men would be a little in the way." Aunt Anne spoke quite seriously. She had thought it an odd thing to say.

"I have, you see, a talent for men. I like my girl friends, but—they are not so amusing."

Cyril's face betrayed his annoyance at her talking this nonsense to his aunt.

Maria was charmed to have provoked him. Anything was better than indifference. "You need not look quite so murderous, Cyril. There is no chance of my seeing Mr. Wyncote or any other man. Aunt Anne, do you know Mr. Wyncote? so handsome, so clever, so well-bred. Cyril dislikes him; I cannot imagine why."

Poor Aunt Anne got most uncomfortable. She began to see that there was a great deal between husband and wife that was not right, and it made her infinitely sad. But, meek and quiet as she was, and arriving with a certain deliberation at any conclusions, she was yet capable of action if she felt action to be right.

"You are not too ill for music?" she said, in a tone half of inquiry, half assertion, and she opened

the small piano standing at a little distance and began to play.

Aunt Anne's playing was one of her gifts. She had one of those perfectly musical intuitions which one meets with at rare intervals. Sweet, old-fashioned melodies came softly from her delicate fingertips, airs that reminded the hearer of the perfume of *pot-pourri* and the world of long ago as we conceive it to have been. Brilliant playing would have seemed as much out of keeping with her gentle presence as a fashionable fuzzy toupee; but the lovely old English, Irish, and Scottish airs were given with a pathos which in a world of incessant hurry are seldom heard.

Maria, who was a musician, and really loved melody, was moved as she was seldom moved.

All her assumption of flippancy, all her little airs and graces, were forgotten; and as each air came sweeping across her senses her emotion found vent in large tears that flowed silently over

her face unchecked, and, as she trusted, unobserved. When she had played a good many things Aunt Anne began modulating, telling a sort of story as she went along, and telling it beautifully. Cyril was sitting listening with real delight, and turned to see whether his wife was appreciative or whether, to use her own expression, she was bored. Once again he was puzzled; once again he thought that he saw tears.

But when Miss Burlington had finished and was rising, Maria called out gaily, "Now, dear auntie, pray play something cheerful; else I shall dream to-night that I was assisting at my own funeral to the dead march in 'Saul'."

Then Cyril felt that he had been mistaken. Of course there had been no tears.

CHAPTER III.

OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY GENUS.

MR. BURLINGTON did not contemplate with much satisfaction the arrival of the girl friends his wife had spoken of. But he could make no objection. He gave her less and less of his society, and, though many of the county neighbours had called and said that when invited they were willing to come, neither their spontaneous civility nor the response they gave to invitations was very hearty, or, it may be said, very friendly. As before stated, young Mrs. Burlington liked dazzling people, and did not care to please them.

The younger women did not pretend to care for one who almost invariably eclipsed them. Mothers very naturally objected to a young woman who monopolised the attention of all the young men, and whose clothes were of a cut and make that were a marked, a painful, contrast to the very provincial garments worn by their daughters. A brilliant woman pays directly or indirectly many a penalty; and we all know that the most brilliant light casts the blackest shadow.

Therefore Mrs. Burlington passed many days in her own society, and did not find her own society amusing. Only one friend could come. Flora Harrington had not perhaps been one of her greatest friends during her school life, and had in those days been much inclined to question the position taken up by Maria Kingson. But a schoolgirl without a father or mother, without a charming place to ask you to in the short holidays, who possessed no more pocket-money than the other girls, was one

thing, and a young woman, entirely her own mistress, with a place, a good-natured husband, and many thousands a year, was quite another.

Flora, whose people had no "place," and who was not well off, was enchanted to be invited to the Burlingtons', and went, it may be added, prepared to stay. Flora was what is called a very lively girl. She was not very pretty, and she was not clever; but she was shrewd, knew how to make the most of herself, and was absolutely without shyness or reserve. In plain English, she was marvellously impudent, and her audacity at times and with certain people was counted as wit. She had quite made up her mind that it would be useful to make a conquest of Mr. Burlington. There was no sort of use in being Mrs. Burlington's friend if the husband did not approve of her. To achieve the subjugation of Mr. Burlington she must wait to see how things stood, and in what way she could best carry out her project.

It is only fair to add that the conquest in question was only intended to be platonic and perfectly harmless; but she wanted to be on terms with the Burlingtons likely to lead to a prolonged stay. Flora, even more than most people, hated small means, visible small economies, indifferent accommodation, and all the pressing evils of a narrow income, as she hated drizzling rain, cold, or anything in the world that was disagreeable. It was delightful to her pleasure-loving nature to be invited to stay "for a good long time," and her harmless ambition was to make her visit very long indeed.

Mr. Burlington found her established at his wife's feet when he came in late. She was sitting on a low stool, and her very fluffy head reclining against Mrs. Burlington's knee.

She was very large, with an innocent baby face contradicted by a large and very sensual mouth. She looked up at Mr. Burlington with her most innocent expression as Maria introduced her husband.

"I am too comfortable to move. Oh, I hope you don't mind," she said with the self-possession of fifty; "and I am so pleased to find a friend unchanged after so many months of the terrible ordeal of matrimony."

"I am glad you find my wife looking well. I myself think her sprained knee and the injury to her shoulder have left traces, and that she looks pale."

"I find her delightfully the same; her brilliancy undimmed, her personality the same. It is very pleasant. You must have taken very good care of her." Flora spoke this with emphasis.

Mr. Burlington looked at her gravely, as at a new species. He was tired and wanted a cup of tea, and regretted having gone to his wife's room for it, when he found the new arrival there. He had forgotten that she was coming that day, and he had also forgotten to order the carriage to fetch her. With compunction he asked his wife whether she had remembered to send it to the station.

Flora answered for her in quite an apologetic tone—"Oh, pray don't think that it mattered, but she did remember it. Molly is not one of those who forgets."

Mr. Burlington drank his tea in silence. It jarred upon him to hear this girl calling his wife by a familiar pet name.

"What a heavenly house you have, Mr. Burlington. I may tell you that everyone has been wondering what sort of shrine you kept her in, and whether it was fit for the fair being who was enshrined in it. Please don't smile, Mr. Burlington! I nearly did say entombed, but I didn't say it. If I had said it, would you ever have forgiven me? You see, any country place is dull, deadly dull, especially for any one with brilliant, social gifts. But when I arrived—Now I have seen the shrine, I see many mitigations!"

"I am glad to hear it," said Mr. Burlington, gravely.

"Are you really? Well, I tell you that I adore old trees, old houses, and old—men!"

She said this with her most innocent baby expression, but gave a quick look at him to see how he took it. Maria laughed merrily. "This love of the antique is something new, Flossy. I never knew old things had any attraction for you."

"Ah, I adore old things—with reservations, of course—old clothes, and very ugly old men. Whoever liked old clothes?"

"My husband does. He has many suits no one would thank you for, and his hats—They are much more than historical."

"Shall we draw a veil over them? It seems the appropriate thing to do regarding old hats."

"I assure you," laughed Maria, who was excited by Flora's high spirits, "that when I pass a scarecrow I have to look twice to see whether it is not perhaps my husband."

"Oh, Maria!" said Flora in a shocked voice. "Pray

don't mind her, Mr. Burlington. We must excuse her because she is an invalid."

Mr. Burlington was not a good-tempered man, and this last speech sent him straight out of the room.

Flora looked pensively at the fire, and said, "What have I said? What have I done? I did so wish to be friends with him!"

"Please, don't be a goose, Flora," said her hostess, with sharpness. "Do you suppose my husband can be vexed with silly speeches like these."

"Oh, but I know he was vexed, dear. Shall I beg his pardon? Oh, dear Molly, why did you not warn me? You might have told me that your husband was—difficult."

"Flora, you are too silly. What does it all matter."

"It matters a great deal to me. I think your husband is——"

"Now, Flora, pray be quiet; you are as bad as ever. You are very provoking."

"Provoking, my child? No, anything but that. But cheer up, dear, and I will tell no one else that I think that your husband is a bear."

"Flora!"

"Molly!"

"If you wish to keep my friendship, you must never say this to me again. I allow no one to discuss my husband with me."

"Dear, dear, dear; how cross we are. Well, then I will promise never to discuss him. Of course, with all this," she said, waving her hands round the room, "you expected to have something to put up with?"

Maria was so angry that she thought it best to say nothing, and a somewhat marked silence lasted for some moments.

"Are you never going to speak to me again?" asked Flora in a voice of comic despair, making an absurd gesture of anguish.

"We can talk on any other subject," Maria answered, trying to recover her equanimity.

"Very well, but if I may not say what I want to say just now, I really shall blow up, my head will be overstocked with ideas."

Maria said nothing.

"If I may speak without risking the terrible fate of having my head chopped off, I should like to ask one question—to say one thing."

"Say anything you like," said Maria, a little wearily, "as long as you do not abuse my husband to my very face."

"I will solemnly promise only to do it behind your back," said Flora Harrington with trembling eyes; and then she added in a great hurry, "I am very much surprised, Molly, neither you nor your husband are the very least in love. It is very funny. Were you in love? Was he in love? How was it?"

Maria crimsoned. "How can you tell? How can you judge?" she asked angrily.

"Oh, my child! I have had the disease so very

badly myself. I know the signs so well. You and Mr. Burlington are equally indifferent to each other. That is quite plainly to be seen."

"You think so because we are not demonstrative people;" but Maria's heart beat quick with indignant annoyance.

"My dearest Molly, you frighten me; you look so fiery. I declare I'm in a blue funk. I thought that as a real friend we might talk quite openly to each other."

"But do you not understand that even between friends some subjects are sacred."

"I didn't know; how could I? I am not married, worse luck! Only Maria, with your beauty and your gifts, you could make any man, even your husband, passionately, violently in love with you! There is one infallible receipt for a man's indifference; make him jealous—make him frantically jealous."

Maria was speechless. Never had she been thrown quite alone with Flora Harrington before.

How completely she had misunderstood her character. She spoke now with an effort at self-command, and said quietly; "I am sorry to have only a dull visit to offer you."

"Are you going to see no one—have no one here to see me?" said Flora Harrington in a tone of tragic despair.

"Not just yet. My shoulder has been badly hurt, and I am obliged to keep quiet for the present. I warned you, Flora."

"Oh, I don't mind a bit; but, of course, it is a little dull for me without a coat in sight."

Maria was much startled by the way in which Flora spoke. Was it possible that she had always been the same, and that the change was in herself? Or had Flora deteriorated, and grown terribly vulgar?

"I hope very soon to be better. I will do my best to amuse you," she answered quietly. She trusted Flora would not make such speeches to Aunt Anne or to her husband.

Flora ostentatiously suppressed a yawn. "I must go and see about flowers for my gown to-night," she said, patting her fluffy head all over with her large white hands. "I have to live up to my name, and I adore flowers, and wear a great quantity—when I can get them."

"Tell Malcolm what you want, and he will cut them for you, Flora."

"Malcolm being No. 1. in the garden, I suppose; all right, if I don't find him I will help myself," and before Maria could answer her she had gone.

It may be mentioned that Flora made no effort to find the gardener. She sauntered through the conservatory and hot-houses, and despoiled both, and, not being accustomed to cut hot-house flowers, did considerable mischief. She used no knife or scissors, but tore bunches of stephanotis off as high as she could reach them, thereby damaging trails of nearly two years' growth; and, being anxious to wear white, or nearly white, she picked or

rather wrenched off a large quantity of nephitos roses, the cherished hope of a coming flower show. Well contented with her spoils, she went into the house and found her way to her room, where she arranged the flowers to her satisfaction.

Mr. Burlington was a little surprised at the lavish display, and privately reflected a little severely on Malcolm's undue generosity. All he said was, "Do you always wear a great many flowers?" His tone was not unkind, but there was evidently surprise, and not pleasant surprise.

"I am Flora. I am obliged to live up to my name. Do you mind? Molly gave leave," she answered.

Mr. Burlington said nothing. Expecting a tête-à-tête, Miss Harrington was in her turn surprised to hear an arrival, and to see Aunt Anne enter upon the scene. "The chaperon," she said to herself. "This is amusing." Mr. Burlington's affectionate greeting and the introduction that fol-

lowed explained things, but Flora Harrington was rather at a loss to understand the evident relief expressed by her host. She was not flattered. It would have amused her far more to have found herself sitting alone at dinner with Mr. Burlington, and able to study him. At present he was an unknown quantity, she said to herself. There was also something about Aunt Anne which somewhat subdued her, and a twinkle in the elderly woman's eyes which a little daunted her. It may be said that expression misled many people, for Aunt Anne could not make fun of anyone, though her sense of the ridiculous was quick enough. At any rate, the false impression was of some use on the present occasion.

"Where shall I sit?" asked Flora, gaily, as they went into the dining-room and she found herself at a round table. "Pray do not think of me, Miss Burlington. I will sit anywhere."

"I am afraid I was not thinking of you," said Aunt Anne, seriously. "I was sorry that on the

occasion of your first visit here my niece was not able to fill her own place. When two people are at home, and one is a visitor," laughed Aunt Anne, "much thought is not required."

Miss Harrington made no reply. As dinner went on Aunt Anne noticed the large bunch of roses, and spoke of them. "Malcolm has been more generous than I ever imagined he had it in him to be at this moment," she said, in a peculiar tone.

"May I ask why?"

"Because of the flower show. He intends to win the first prize with some of those lovely nephitos roses. He must have an immense quantity to have spared you so many, and he has been lavish. I see many buds."

"You see, I did not find him. I took them myself. I suppose it comes to the same thing?" Miss Harrington's tone was indifferent more than apologetic. But she was provoked with herself, and felt that she had done a stupid thing.

Mr. Burlington and his aunt looked at each other. They were equally annoyed. Conversation languished after this, when Miss Harrington farther astonished them. Pushing back her chair, she said, glancing round quite as if she were doing the right thing, "Shall we go upstairs?" leaving Miss Burlington and her nephew to make their own comments on this extraordinary breach in the manners and customs of the class they belonged to.

"I beg your pardon, Aunt Anne. I never saw your signal," exclaimed Mr Burlington, hurrying to the door.

"For the best reason in the world," said Flora, airily; "she never made one. I thought we never, never, never were going to move," and, with a laugh which was full of mischievous glee, she passed through the doorway into the next room.

"I wonder whether she is a single specimen, or one of a number," said Mr. Burlington, blankly. "How long is she going to stay, and what can my

wife see in her to like? If this is the sort of friend she likes and cherishes, I no longer feel surprised that she finds she is bored here."

But as a just man he reflected that his wife had never done an ill-bred thing, and that she had begged not to see Miss Harrington that evening, though she would like to see Aunt Anne.

The friendship between his wife and Aunt Anne was always a source of comfort to him, and he went to the drawing-room to give his wife's message. Flora had made herself quite happy by piling all the sofa cushions upon the rug, and sitting down in front of a small fire, lit because of Aunt Anne's chilly proclivities.

Mr. Burlington looked at her for a moment, and considered that her attitude was not a becoming one to a very large figure. Then he took his book, and sat down to read as usual.

"Shall I get a book for you, Miss Harrington?" he asked, politely.

"No; thanks. I am going to bed directly."

"Do you always go to bed very early?" asked Aunt Anne, by way of saying something.

"It all depends," answered Flora, naively, and without in the least intending to be rude. "If I am amused I sit up; if I am bored I go to bed."

She went to bed very early indeed.

CHAPTER IV.

MISTAKES.

THAT Miss Harrington should treat his aunt with respect and consideration was one point Mr. Burlington determined to make clear to his wife, and through her to her friend. The difficulty lay in the fact that Flora, on supremely good terms with herself, acted without in the very least being aware that her actions were extraordinary. Reared roughly in the country, where she had no society, she was absolutely ignorant of any rules. The very few second-rate people she knew thought her impudence wit, and encouraged her. She was not at all a

bad-hearted girl; but she was a type of one imperfectly educated, thrown too young on her own resources, and steeped in the novels all good mothers eschew for their daughters as a rule.

Her mother, a woman with small means and many daughters, brought them up with the idea that they must marry, and as soon as possible. She farther considered that, given opportunity, they could marry whom they pleased. "Just make up your mind to marry some good man when he asks you. You cannot afford to wait." Most of Flora's sisters had married—some well; some very badly; but she herself, while having endless flirtations, remained Flora Harrington, to her mother's annoyance and her own surprise. Unfortunately, when Mr. Burlington spoke to his wife he forgot that she had not been present when the offence was given, and that, as he made a general accusation, and did not condescend to details, he left his story half untold.

No one would have been more vexed, no one

would have been more humiliated, than his wife had she known the whole truth.

"I am sorry you do not like Flora," she said, feeling bound to defend her friend. "She has a very good heart."

"She has atrocious manners."

"Has she?"

"Then those roses. By the way, she said you gave her leave to get them. Malcolm is in despair. He has nothing to show, and he feels it keenly. I wish you would insist on her asking for things, and not taking them."

Maria was too generous to say that she had begged her to let Malcolm cut them, and, as she was too truthful to mislead him, she said nothing, and this annoyed him.

"I am vexed more than I can say by this intrusion just now. If you were well it would be different; but I shall have to breakfast with that girl, and she annoys me terribly. Did you intend her to be here for me to entertain?"

"No. I thought—I hoped—I should be all right. I am sorry. As for breakfast, we can breakfast in my sitting-room. I have many dull hours, and I thought Flora would cheer them."

He heard a ring of regret in her voice, and it made him still more vexed, because, as usual, it seemed to put him in the wrong.

"I have no wish to deprive you of anything likely to cheer you," he said kindly; "but I am vexed that this sort of girl is the friend you choose; and I suspect she has no intention of shutting herself up to cheer your lonely hours. At any rate, things do not point that way at present."

Maria had equal misgivings on this point; but she would not give up her friend, at any rate yet. The breakfast was ordered upstairs, and Flora was extremely amused.

"I suppose your husband is frightened of me. I never knew I was terrifying before," she said, laughing. "What a primitive creature he is! You

need not look cross, Maria; that is not abuse."

She broke her egg in silence; then she asked, suddenly, "What plans have you made for me to-day? Am I to drive, or ride, or what is it to be? This morning I intend to explore. But I am going to be in to lunch afterwards?"

Mrs. Burlington saw that the wish to cheer her lonely hours was not taking an active form at present.

"If you are out all the morning, we might read something together this afternoon," she suggested, with a little hesitation.

"Read! my excellent and best of Marias! Nothing is farther from my ideas of enjoyment, and you wish me to be happy, do you not?" she added, with a pleading look and a pathetic little sigh.

"Of course," said Maria, reflecting that her husband certainly had judged rightly.

"Are there no cards I could leave for you anywhere? Have you no commissions? I might drive to the little town I arrived at, and do some shop-

ping. I see you have shopping to do ; that's all right." She went off with a little nod ; came in to luncheon, put on a smart hat, and went to do the shopping she had proposed.

She came in late, and had tea with Maria, giving a very amusing account of her expedition. When she paused Maria wanted to say something, and it was difficult to say.

"Have you paid many country visits, Flora ; or is this your first?"

"Now, what does your question imply ? Have I been in houses as big as this ? Never. I have been to relations who made use of me. I intend to make the most of my time here, I can tell you !"

"You know I do not wish to vex you ; but will you remember that Aunt Anne is mistress of the house in my absence?"

"I am not likely to forget it."

"I am afraid you did forget it last night."

"When ?"

"You took the initiative in some way. My husband was vexed."

"Was he? Good gracious! he will often be vexed, I am afraid. I thought I was to make myself at home." She threw her head back and laughed heartily. "That's it, is it? I have found it out. Now he looked indigo at me to-day. What other crime have I committed?"

Maria's colour rose.

"Those roses. I begged you to let Malcolm cut them."

"And as I did not see him, I took them."

"And spoiled the flower show for him, and, I may add, spoiled my pet stephanotis also."

"Really, Molly, if I have so many things to remember, so many prohibitions to attend to, I might just as well not have come. How changed you are, after all. When we were at school you would have been the very first to have done the same thing."

"I hardly think so. However, Flora, please try not to trespass again. Surely your natural good sense will tell you that there are certain things...."

"My excellent Maria, I have no good sense; never had any. But, as your husband is so frightfully particular, I will not offend him again, you'll see; or your aunt either." Then suddenly she altered her tone. "I give you my word, Maria, I never thought! That is all. Don't be vexed, dear. You shall tell me everything you like, and I will be as good as gold."

Then Maria kissed her, and peace was made, and when she left her and went down the corridor Maria murmured to herself, "I was quite right; she has an excellent heart."

Aunt Anne came to dinner that evening with small prospect of enjoyment; but she found a different Flora; a much-subdued Flora, who said to Mr. Burlington, "I do not owe you a grudge for telling tales of me, but why did you not scold me yourself?"

"I had no wish to scold you," he answered, somewhat taken aback; "I asked my wife to speak to you."

"You see, she told me beforehand to let the gardener cut those unhappy roses; only I thought it a fad of hers, and of no consequence."

"Oh, she asked you herself to let Malcolm cut them?"

"Yes, and then I did it; I very often for the fun of the thing do exactly what I am told not to do, and I am sorry for it afterwards. I am sorry now."

She put her palms together after the fashion of a medieval saint, and dropped her eyelids. Mr. Burlington laughed, and Aunt Anne smiled also. Then other things were talked of. When dinner was over Flora stood up with a ridiculous expression of anxiety on her face. "Please have I been good?" she said, in a meek voice, and only the solemn entry of Marsham put an end to her intended speech. Maria was allowed to be moved down-

stairs in a few days, and the prospect of society, drives, etc., considerably brightened up the drooping spirits of Miss Flora Harrington. Her spirits had drooped because she had not made any farther way with Mr. Burlington, whose opinion never changed. He had his own ideas upon the subject of Miss Harrington, but he kept them to himself. He might not be in love with his wife, but he was not going to allow anyone else to bestow confidences upon him.

Twice he had defeated Flora in a very quiet, perfectly straightforward way, and she was a young woman who disliked being defeated more than most people.

He used a deep embrasure in the library a good deal, preferring it to his study for writing and reading. Flora arrived upon the scene one morning, hunted for a book, came and sat down opposite to him, and asked his advice about her choice of books in a manner that was flattering to him had

he been a man to whom flattery was pleasant. But the invasion displeased him, and he showed it, by leaving the room with his book and not returning to it. Afterwards she said, "I was so shocked to find I had driven you away. I am so sorry! Did I really disturb you so much?"

"Yes, you did drive me away," he said very quietly. "An unaccustomed presence is disturbing."

"I thought, perhaps, that dear Molly sat there—that there was no harm."

He understood perfectly that this had meant to sting, that she knew how far apart his wife and he were in these things, but he answered, with the rather haughty reserve which daunted her always: "The presence of a wife cannot be called an unaccustomed presence. That is different."

The other time he had given her a well-deserved check was in his wife's presence. Flora had alluded to some trifling episode that had been talked over by Aunt Anne and himself as amusing, in a way

to make it appear that there was a private understanding between herself and Mr. Burlington. Her only object was to amuse herself and, perhaps, disturb Maria's quiescent manner of accepting life as it was offered to her. But Mr. Burlington immediately turned to his wife, and made her so completely a party to the whole affair that Flora felt rather foolish.

She meant no real mischief; she was only playing with edged tools. She was not a child, and the remainder of the proverb escaped her memory. It is rather a terrible reflection, but it is a subject brought home to us every day, that the greatest mischief in private, as in public, life is as often brought about by the action of a foolish person as by one deliberately mischievous and "with malice prepense." Flora's heart was good. She hated to see animals or human beings suffer; she would have liked to be able to go through the world without a ruffle on the surface of her existence, and

she would do anything in the world to escape a responsibility, or to avoid anything disagreeable. But she was indifferent to any sufferings she did not see, and, though she hated sorrow, it never occurred to her to do anything to relieve it. As long as everything was kept out of her sight, nothing signified to her.

Mr. Burlington asked himself whether his wife's eyes would always be shut to Miss Harrington's ways. To do her justice, he felt that his wife was herself very different, but intimacy with one so second-rate and so underbred lowered her in his opinion.

Altogether, Miss Harrington's visit was not productive of much happiness to anyone. It may be added that, weighing the pleasures of a somewhat luxurious life against the *gêne* of being obliged to behave herself (if she wished to stay on), the young lady thought at times that it was hardly worth while, and that it did not give her all the happiness she had expected.

CHAPTER V.

THE WYNCOTES OF WYNCOTE HUNDRED.

THE Wyncotes of Wyncote Hundred were people who were frequently quoted as instances of men who did things that would be forgiven in no other family, and yet who still held their heads up in the world, and were received everywhere—that is, almost everywhere. They exemplified the proverb of how one man may steal a horse, while another may not look over a hedge.

For some generations they had possessed a very unenviable notoriety. Their hard drinking and gambling in old days, their escapades in one

direction and another, the duels they had fought, the scrapes they had got into and out of, all these things were matters of history.

As usual, where these traditions are carried down through many generations, there was much that was exaggerated and untrue; it may be added that there was also much that was true. The misfortune of such traditions is very great. The sons are apt to excuse follies, and to expect other people to excuse them on the strength of hereditary character—that is to say, those sons who are inclined to wildness. On the other hand, one out of such a family, however quiet, and good, and upright he may be, will often be credited with the bad qualities he has a genuine horror of; and it is very difficult to rise superior to one's surroundings, and to shake off impressions which cling all too closely about your family and your way of life.

The house of Wyncote Hundred was one of the real magnificent old places of England. The

family was Saxon, and had possessed the place from time immemorial. It may be added that it had never done anything to spoil it.

In modern times and to modern utilitarian eyes the long passages, the huge rooms, and the deep windows were, all extraordinarily wasteful, taking space into consideration; the house covered so much ground, being built in those delightful days when the restrictive idea of utilitarianism had not yet become a dogma. It stood rather high—high enough to look over massive woods and acres of deer park; and, if the family traditions were in one way very bad, on the other hand there was a curious feeling of affection and even devotion among the people for the family—a feeling which had survived many rude shocks, and which was the simple outcome of residence and constant residence among them.

If the traditions were bad, as previously stated, at any rate there had never been a failing in kindness towards their dependents. Even in the house-

hold, with all the peremptory manner of swift commands, the servants held the position of friends, and the service was almost as hereditary as the tenants. No one could point to hardness on "the hundreds." In bad times the family and dependents stood together, and in good times they shared together. The family held a position envied by many richer and newer neighbours.

The deer-park was very lovely, and extended up a hill, on the foot of which stood the house, and near the foot and higher up the ground was more broken and much wilder, ending in open moor called in the country "the waste." The present proprietor of the place was a widower, an elderly man, and he had one son. In most counties, even when properties stand far apart, something is known about the different landowners. They are seen in church, or they take an interest in county business. In short, they are, at any rate, known by sight.

But old Mr. Wyncote was of the Romish faith,

and had a chapel in the house. Therefore, the parish church was never the richer for his presence, and the parishioners were never able to talk about him as they did of other squires. What was considered much worse was the way in which his child was brought up. His son had been at a Catholic seminary, and had travelled with a tutor.

Many years ago there had been a terrible scandal, but it was so many years ago now that no one exactly remembered what it had all been about.

Not that that mattered, for if a scandal existed nothing was too bad to believe; only, as people said, the Wyncotes did such extraordinary things that it must have been something desperately bad to have lived so long in everyone's remembrance. Old Mr. Wyncote did not look like a man who suffered from spasms of remorse. But, of course, he might be desperately hardened. He was upright in figure, of a fresh colour, with a clear grey eye, having an occasional merry twinkle in it that at

times deepened into mockery. No man could possibly look less like a sinner. But, as somebody remarked, he might be "a whitened sepulchre," for the world is nothing if not charitable.

Charity does not always appear in talking about a neighbour, and the one consolation left for human nature is that sometimes the bitterest tongues do the kindest actions, and the person most prompt to abuse is often the most prompt to help. It is your indifferent people that neither blow hot nor blow cold that walk by and give no assistance. That Mr. Wyncote had had troubles, no one doubted. He had adored his wife and lost her very young, and one of an affectionate family living in perfectly harmonious relations with his sisters and brothers, he had survived them all.

His son was a good-looking, bright young fellow, and people who were anxious to be witty, and who talked of homely wits, would have had to sharpen theirs in any encounter with him. But his

interests were narrowed by the life he led. His father was his friend, his companion, and his confidant; but until now he had never been in love. He was one of the men of whom it might be safely predicted that he would have that disease badly if he had it at all.

He was walking with his father one day, and coming along the grass, followed by his favourite dog—a Pyrenean sheep dog which he had brought home with him, and which rejoiced in the name of Sebastian, but of course in a minimized form, and which answered to the abbreviation in the shape of “Basti.” There was no lack of conversation between father and son, both being equally interested in the buildings, drainage, births, deaths, and marriages on the property.

“What are you thinking of doing just now?” asked Mr. Wyncote.

“I was going to ride over and ask for Mrs. Burlington. It seems strange that she is still laid up. I am afraid her injury was greater than we knew.”

"So it appears. Go, my boy; but I do not wish intimacy or acquaintance with them beyond what actual courtesy requires."

"So you told me, father. Will you give me a reason?"

"No; because knowing it would do no good, and will certainly not add to your happiness."

"Mrs. Burlington is very pretty, I think; but she looks unhappy."

"Most women would look unhappy after a nasty fall."

"It was when she apparently had got over it. Her eyes look melancholy."

"If that is the case, it is still more desirable that you should drop her acquaintance."

"That seems a hard doctrine."

"Do you really think so?" and Mr. Wyncote looked his son steadily in the face. "If a young woman is unhappy in her married life, and is good-looking, is it prudent that a young man should console her?"

His son flushed a little, and made no answer. He acknowledged to himself that he felt a particular interest in Mrs. Burlington. There was something unconventional and original about her that had taken hold of his imagination.

He turned his father's words aside, however, lightly.

"We have no right to suppose that Mrs. Burlington is unhappy in her married life."

"No right at all," answered Mr. Wyncote, aware that he had committed an indiscretion. "We are putting a supposititious case altogether."

They separated without farther talk. Young Wyncote strolled homewards in deep thought.

"If it was that," he said aloud, and then he went to change his things.

He rode over "to inquire," and certainly had very little idea of seeing anyone. But as he drew near the house he met Flora Harrington in the avenue. His first impulse was to ride on. He did

not know the young lady, and had certainly no intention of introducing himself to a stranger. But Flora turned deliberately, and, hurrying a little, arrived at the front door in time to see his cards handed over to the servant as he prepared to turn away.

"You will be glad to hear," said Flora, in her suavest manner, "that Mrs. Burlington is much better, and in the sitting-room."

"I am, indeed, glad. She is, then, almost well?"

"Almost. Her wounds and bruises are fast becoming things of the past. She was much obliged to you for your inquiries, and also grateful for your timely help."

"As my shot caused the accident, I could do nothing less than assist her to the best of my ability."

"Of course not. Are you in a great hurry to get home? because Mrs. Burlington, I am sure, will see you. I know that she wishes to tell you how much she is indebted to you."

Flora was drawing on her imagination, but it was not in her to lose the chance of having some one to amuse her.

"I am Flora Harrington," she said, with a smile, "and Mrs. Burlington's great friend. Now you must tell me your name. Of course, Wyncote, but the *nom de baptême*?"

"Horace, at your service," he answered, laughing.

"And where do you come in the Wyncote family?"

"I am sorry to say I stand alone. I am my father's only child."

"Are you sorry?" said Flora, laughing. "I am one of many, and I would rather be an only daughter, I assure you."

"May we come in?" she asked, without waiting for an answer. "Here is Mr. Horace Wyncote come to ask in person how you are."

Maria was lying back on her chair, and looked

pale enough till she realised who it was. Then she felt annoyed, and a rush of crimson flooded her face. It was extremely tiresome of Flora, and the thing of all others that her husband would most object to. Horace Wyncote sat down, and began those sympathetic inquiries which were natural in the circumstances.

By degrees the influence of his cordial manner and his pleasant voice drove away all regrets. He was a neighbour; she was a married woman, and not alone, as Flora Harrington was there; and Maria began to be quite at her ease, and to shine with her wonted brilliancy. She ordered up tea, and they were having quite a good time of it, when the door was thrown open and Cyril stood in the doorway, so astonished at the scene before him that he with difficulty mastered himself, and gave the conventional handshake.

Horace Wyncote saw his expression, and felt that the suppositions of his father and himself were well

founded. Mr. Burlington looked grave and displeased. It was evident that the wish expressed by his father as to dropping the acquaintance was shared by Mrs. Burlington's husband.

All women have a vein of obstinacy, and something of the spirit of contradiction in their composition, which quality in woman is generally called determination or firmness. The fact of Mrs. Burlington's unhappiness, and the strong obstacles there appeared to be in the way of their being friends made Horace Wyncote determined to carry his point, and be accepted as a frequent visitor, if not a familiar friend.

"Is the fellow never going?" thought Mr. Burlington as he heard the animated conversation his entrance had momentarily interrupted carried on with renewed vigour. It gave him small consolation to see that it was Flora Harrington and not his wife who took the greatest share in it, because his wife seemed so thoroughly to enter into it and enjoy it.

Where was the resigned expression and look of

languor? Both had vanished now, and Maria, with her brightest look and a brightened colour, was her brilliant self once more. Was this brilliancy to be called forth only by strangers, and strangers who were distinctly obnoxious to him? His annoyance took the unbecoming form of a gravity so stern that young Wyncote commiserated more than ever the fate which had placed so delightful a girl in the clutches of so disagreeable a man!

Maria was roused by her husband's evident and unjust displeasure to exert herself. She not only enjoyed the war of words, which, according to her habit, Flora Harrington used as the quickest way of establishing an intimacy with anyone; but she also began to give and take, and laughed with the glee of a happy and careless child, over wit so poor as to be quite beyond recognition as far as her husband was concerned. He sat on, feeling out in the cold, and his irritation and annoyance increasing every moment.

Horace Wyncote, enchanted with the footing he was so happily put on, felt quite grateful to Flora for having so successfully smoothed his path.

She still farther smoothed his path, and completed Mr. Burlington's discomfiture by saying, "We were so dull; it was so nice of you to come and see us; pray come again as soon as ever you can!"

And Mrs. Burlington, to whom the young man looked with some anxiety, repeated it. "We shall always be glad to see you," she said, with a delightful smile, "pray come again soon—as soon as you can."

When the door finally closed on the unconscious young man, Mr. Burlington intended to say something to his offending spouse, but she took the initiative and left him without a chance.

"How could you think we should not like that young fellow, Cyril? He is quite charming. In this dull place, it is quite delightful to have so desirable a neighbour!"

"I particularly wished you not to become intimate with that family."

"But he is not the family. And Flora likes him; do you not?" she added, turning to her.

"Immensely."

"His visit has certainly done me good. I was quite hipped, and so frightfully depressed. It is refreshing to have been amused."

Mr. Burlington was afraid that, if he gave the only answer he could give, there might be a difference of opinion between them, and before Flora Harrington he could not risk this.

He retreated, not certain whether he had not suffered in the affair, and heartily vexed with everything and everybody (himself included) for taking it so much to heart.

"Dearest," said Flora, when Mr. Burlington's steps had died away in the distance; "an inspiration has come to me!"

Mrs. Burlington, feeling the reaction after un-

wanted excitement, said wearily, "I am too tired to guess riddles, Flora. Please speak out."

"There is a secret—and the Wyncotes know it—about Mr. Burlington."

"Nonsense!"

"There is! Do you suppose that Mr. Burlington would be so wretched, so put out, by your seeing that young man unless he had some serious private reason?"

"Nonsense!"

"That reason you are not to know. Besides this, my dear, your husband is jealous."

"Again I say nonsense!"

"Say it if it gives you any pleasure. Your saying it does not alter the fact one little bit. I know people's faces so very well; there is a secret, and he is jealous. I do not pretend he is in love with you, but—he is annoyed to find how well you can be under other influences, and how witty and bright. Men, my dear, are in this country worse than Turks. The Turks make their women wear veils, our men

like their wives to keep their wit, their gifts, all their powers of pleasing for themselves only. Now, you poor dear, you look tired out, and I shall run off and leave you to rest. You did not mind my breaking the ice and bringing in that man, did you?"

Maria was nothing if not truthful. "To tell you the truth, Flora, I wish you had not done it," she said, candidly. "I enjoyed it all, and thought it fun at the time; but I never feel quite happy when I disregard my husband's wishes."

"Oh, you poor dear! What we can come to!" exclaimed Flora, laughing. "Well, never mind; say it was me.

"But that would annoy him still more."

"Well, then, let him be annoyed."

Maria was silent. It did not suit Flora to leave her in this mood. So she returned to the sofa, and said seriously, "You must not mind my saying that you make a great mistake in the way you manage your husband."

"Manage him?"

"Yes; every woman could, would, and should manage her husband, in a nice way of course. You show you are a little afraid of him."

"Indeed, I do not."

"But you do. In this very matter, because he has a secret reason for objecting to the presence of a delightful young man you are annoyed that he was here. I warn you that if you do not assert yourself now in the first year of your married life you will be in thralldom all your life!"

With these oracular words Flora took her departure, leaving Mrs. Burlington to such repose as her perturbed spirit could master.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT WAS THE SECRET?

IT certainly was hard that poor Aunt Anne, who at any time would have suffered any pain herself rather than stir up violent dissension, should have been the innocent cause of creating wide dissension between her nephew and his wife. It was so innocently done! She was sitting talking to them both—Flora being for the time in her own room—and, in reviewing certain families and certain impending functions looming in the political atmosphere, she said, “How curiously lukewarm the Beryls are now! How unlike the deep interest taken by that family

in my day. If the election is lost, they cannot say that they have striven to avert defeat."

Cyril made one of his quiet disclaimers: "I suppose, as years roll on, we all get more indifferent about political success."

Maria, who was pronounced quite well again, looked in surprise from one to the other. Was it possible that Aunt Anne knew nothing of her indiscretion—of her hit at the girl she considered her husband's former love, which had caused such a commotion when they had been there, and for which she always remembered she had been most unreasonably punished.

For one moment she was struck by his having been reticent about it, even with Aunt Anne. Then a worse interpretation suggested itself. Cyril had said nothing because Aunt Anne knew the facts, and would consider that she (Maria) had been within her rights. A flash of indignation made her suddenly change colour, and her words came hurrying and

passionately forth: "The Beryls are not to be trusted in any way; and is it consistent with your idea of what is fair to a wife that they know things and connive at arrangements, and that they should be in the secret of the husband's love affairs, and his wife ignorant of everything?"

"Maria!"

"My dear, I beg you to compose yourself." Poor Aunt Anne felt as if the earth was opening under her feet. This incoherent speech, uttered as if by one possessed, was terrible to her.

Silence might have been wisdom on the part of Mr. Burlington, but, though he could control himself well, he was too full of righteous anger to be silent in the face of such a charge.

"You know nothing; you conjecture everything," he said.

"Ah! you think I do not know. Can you deny that you were—still, may be—in love with Marcia Dorington?"

"I deny nothing, and I refuse to speak upon the subject," he said, hotly; "and if I had been in love, am I the only man of my age who has cared for some one before his marriage?"

"And who cares now; since you arranged she was not to meet me."

"If you only knew the truth," her husband said, sternly, "you would be covered with shame and humiliation. You go upon assertions made by Lady Rhodes."

"Then, tell me the truth."

"You! Disbelieving, indiscreet! What have you ever done to give me the wish to place a secret at your mercy?"

"Ah!" she exclaimed, stung by his words, "then there is a secret; you acknowledge it. You hear, Aunt Anne?"

She stood up in her excitement and confronted the two.

"O, child!" said Aunt Anne, miserably, "why

not trust your husband? This scene is terrible! I cannot, cannot bear it!"

The poor lady covered her face with her hands as if to shut out the flushed and angry figure before her.

"I must speak, and I stand alone! I have no one else to speak to," said Maria, trying, however, to calm herself—trying to resume the command of herself she had so completely lost. "But I appeal to you for justice. I am surrounded by mystery; I am not to make friends in one direction—no reason vouchsafed. I am to avoid intimacies in another—no reason given. Like a puppet, I am to move, walk, stand still, have no convictions no opinions—to be silent and speak by rule. Has my husband bought me? Is it fair that I should be so treated?"

She paused, breathless, and poor Aunt Anne said, almost under her breath, "No; it is not fair."

"You hear, Cyril; you hear!" exclaimed his

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wife. "Even your aunt, because she is true and can judge, and does judge honestly, between us, she does not think you right! Thank you!" she said, with her eyes suddenly filling with tears. "Thank you!"

She swept past them both in a tempest of agitation, and went to her own room. Cyril looked after her with all the astonishment of a man unused to violent exhibition of any emotion. Aunt Anne was in tears.

"She is right, Cyril, and you do not understand—you cannot expect her to act as if she knew everything; and she knows—nothing!"

"If she knew everything, to use your own expression, Aunt Anne," said Cyril, with the calmness of despair, "she would leave me!"

Aunt Anne started in dismay, and gazed at her nephew through her tear-clouded eyes as if she doubted the evidence of her senses.

"Yes," said Cyril, in a tone of conviction. "You

do not know her as I do! It has been a cruel upbringing if her story is ever to be told her! Her pride would be so hurt . . . Do you suppose that, with her character, all her life spoiled, flattered, and surrounded by adulation, she would be content to stay here on sufferance! No! She would go, and then there would be fresh scandal."

"Be comforted," said Aunt Anne, rising, and laying her hand affectionately upon his shoulder; "her affection for you . . ."

A bitter laugh—quite the bitterest she had ever heard from his lips—grated upon her ears. "Aunt Anne, to you I cannot lie! To you I must speak the truth! We were both deceived! I understand now better than I did that we were each told of love felt by the other. What weighed with her I cannot say. I know money did not tempt her. But the deep love she was supposed to have conceived for me never existed, and I . . ."

"And you? Oh, Cyril!"

"I love her more now than I ever expected to love her. I am not blind to her faults. Therefore, according to all theories, I cannot be much in love; but when we married I admired her, and . . ."

Aunt Anne had often wished for an explanation, now it had come to her, and, like most things, came to her when she would rather not have heard it.

"Her trouble was very great. One thing I do want to know," she said, "do not answer if you would rather not. But did you know her story before you spoke?"

She waited breathlessly for his answer.

"No. It was told to me afterwards. I might have gone, perhaps, but it would have been cruel... Aunt Anne, you now know everything. Never let us speak of this again! Now you see how things would be. If Maria thought that my compassion had been roused, that pity for her position had moved me... she would leave me! She has never

been trained to bear anything. I cannot tell you how easy her life has been made for her! It has been a false kindness; and you do not know how much there is in her nature that is fine! I know, for I have been a judge, and not a lover. Now I am her lover!" he added, with whitened lips, "and it is too late!"

"My Cyril! my boy! All will come right. I do not believe that any good woman could live with you and not learn to love you."

"Ah, Aunt Anne! You see me with motherly eyes. I compare myself with others—with Horace Wyncote, for instance. I am plain and elderly and awkward. God help us both," he added, "for we are bound, and one of us feels the fetters already."

Aunt Anne was struggling for composure. She could not add to his grief, she could not press the matter, but she knew that he was wrong in trying to keep his wife in ignorance of what she might learn from others.

"How does Miss Harrington get on? Does she improve on acquaintance?"

"I myself think her detestable," he said, with unthinking frankness; "she is a type of all I most dislike. But I believe that there may be out of sight some redeeming qualities, as my wife likes her, and, indeed, is fond of her. If there was anything radically wrong, I believe Maria would be the first to object."

"And she is fixed here for the time."

"I have no right to put my objections forward. My wife has so little society of any other kind. Everything is formal and conventional—stated visits and no real kindness or friendship. It is hard for her."

"And you think she will not learn anything from outsiders—from this girl?"

He started. He never had taken this view of the question. "I think not," he answered thoughtfully; "young Wyncote knows nothing."

At that moment Flora's strong untrained and

unmusical voice was heard singing away and evidently coming nearer.

Mr. Burlington went out of the room by one door as she came in at the other.

"Dear me," exclaimed Flora, "I hope I have not dispersed the company." She looked with audacious laughing eyes at Aunt Anne, who made no answer after her first somewhat formal greeting.

"Molly is looking all right again," said Flora, plumping her stout person down on the arm of the sofa and swinging her feet airily to and fro.

"Yes; she is looking very well."

"I suppose that she will now have some of the neighbours in and make up to me for having spent three of the dullest weeks on record."

"It is possible."

"You see I never was meant to be a vegetable," said Flora, "and I want some fun."

"Do you? I am afraid that the country at this time of the year is not a very lively place."

“There are materials,” said Flora, “but it occurs to me that the materials are not made the most of. Now tell me in confidence, dear Miss Burlington; you can trust me. Why do people give my dearest friend the cold shoulder? Has she ever done anything wrong?”

“Are you speaking in sober earnest? You are asking such a question about a friend you profess to love!”

Aunt Anne’s voice trembled a little.

“Oh! please don’t fence with me,” said Flora, coming from her seat on the sofa quite close to Aunt Anne. “I am not a fool, I can see things for myself. Mr. Burlington is always in a fever about his wife’s acquaintances; you are nearly as bad. I am moving in a mystery, and I mean to find everything out. Now, there’s Horace Wyncote, a nice, good-looking boy—religion immaterial. What more natural than to let me have my chance. I am sure they are few and far between. Not a

bit of it. If he calls—thunder in the aspect of Mr. Burlington—frigidity and no welcome. Why? I want to know, and you might as well tell me,” said the audacious young woman.

At that moment, a little pale, but quite composed, Mrs. Burlington came into the room, and never in all her life did Aunt Anne welcome the presence of any one more thankfully.

Flora was discomfited. Maria was more absent than usual. But between her and Aunt Anne was so strong an affection that there was no effort needed in each other's society. That great proof of intimacy, silence, when there is nothing to say, when no attempt at talking has to be made, rendered it always pleasant for them to be together. Flora found the constraint tiresome and was provoked at having had a confidence so hurriedly put an end to. “I should have got it all out of the old lady,” she said to herself as she made some excuse and left them.

And Aunt Anne left soon also. The position was hard for her. Her heart was completely won by Mrs. Burlington's absolute directness, and, though she could not act in direct contradiction to her nephew's wishes, she felt in a manner guilty in front of his wife. Mysteries were hateful things, and all her principles and sense of right were arrayed against the position in which her nephew's reticence placed her.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ADVENTURE AND A SAFETY SKIRT.

MR. BURLINGTON had often reason to regret those low-breathed words of his aunt's which had escaped her so involuntarily during that past scene. His wife was colder to him than ever before. He could hear her laugh as he drew near the drawing-room, and the laugh ceased in his presence. Even her smile vanished if he looked at her, and nothing tried him more.

She grew reckless in her talk, and even in her actions; she admitted people to the house often in the afternoon who formerly felt one yearly invita-

tion an honour; and when he sarcastically remarked upon the friendships she seemed to make, she answered that any society was better than none, that "kind hearts were better than coronets" and that, as other people evidently did not care to come to see them, she was justified in welcoming those who did care to come.

Flora still remained, and tried him severely. But the head and front of her offending was the constant presence of Horace Wyncote. At unexpected times he dropped in to luncheon. He would ride over to tea; and remain to dinner. In short, he seemed to be always there.

He also rode a great deal with Mrs. Burlington, for though Flora had learned to ride, and a very quiet and most inoffensive horse had been provided for her portly figure, she was too much of a novice not to hold the unfortunate animal so tight, that even his long-suffering nature took to fidgetting, and, as trotting shook the young lady, and canter-

ing fast was beyond her, Maria and Mr. Wyncote were generally a good bit ahead, and had as often as not to ride back for her.

When Mr. Burlington one day lost his temper, and said something rather sharp about young Wyncote and his constant presence, his wife looked at him in marked surprise. When he made his meaning a little clearer and his language a little stronger, she laughed in his face.

"He amuses me, and in this dull land of ours being amused is such a treat."

"It does not amuse me to find him here at all hours of the day. What does he come for?"

"You had better ask him," she answered gravely. "Flora and I like him, and I think," she said, after a moment's reflection, "that he likes us. I am quite sure he likes me."

"Really! How condescending of him! Most men would like all the attention you pay him. Whether it is quite wise, quite discreet of you to see so

much of any young man I leave you to judge."

"I think it quite wise and discreet to talk to a man who does not look bored to death with me when I am with him!" Maria said in her most provoking tone; and with one of those smiles which her husband thought heartless now, "I often have a curious idea."

"Might one inquire what that curious idea is?"

"Of course you may. One could not say it, I suppose, to all husbands—but you and I are quite exceptional people. I could not, of course, say it if there had ever been any pretence of love between us! But, as we have never been in love—you and I, I can say it, and you will not misunderstand me. Well, I think it such a pity that he and I have met too late!"

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. If we had met before you had married me, I think we should have been desperately in love with each other! I can quite answer

for myself. When I think of that, of course I feel sorry!"

"You try me too far," said her husband, who was almost too angry for words.

"Do I? You see that is what I see every day and what I regret. I am a trial. Now, if I had met the other man—the right man, I might have been the other thing to him. Now, I suppose, it will be Flora, and I am not quite sure that Flora is the right woman for him."

"Do you mean to try to make me believe that Horace Wyncote, who is a gentleman, would ever care for an underbred girl like your friend?"

"One never knows. Now, there could not well be two people more different than we are. You are middle-aged, and grave and serious. You take life seriously, much too seriously, let me tell you; and you are not amusing. You are even (I am speaking openly) dull. You were not in love with me, and I was not in love with you. Nothing was funnier

than your marrying me, and I suppose that it was the very last thing anyone expected you to do. Yet you did it all the same."

A look in her husband's face checked her for a moment. What if he gave her the key, followed Aunt Anne's advice, and explained everything? This rushed through his mind, and vanished again. He could turn the tables on her, but would it be generous to do it now? The sense of his own power made him gentle, and drove away the irritation her speech had caused. How bitterly she would regret that speech if she came to know!

"Maria," he said, quietly, "I am, as you say, middle-aged, grave, and serious. Putting aside all the wild nonsense you have been speaking, as I have by rights experience and you have not, why will you not profit by it? Have you no confidence in my judgment? I know the world, and you do not; a young—I may add, a very handsome—woman, cannot make an intimate friend of a young

man who is neither kith nor kin to her without laying herself open to remark. And the Wyncote name is——”

“That will do,” said his wife coldly. “Always the same thing. If I had never met Horace I might have thought of him as of some one beyond the pale. How you tried to mislead me about him. When we met, and I saw how charming he was, I could hardly reconcile your prejudice against him with that essence of truth you pride yourself upon. You know nothing about him; yet you condemn him! I know him; but console yourself, for he does like Flora—poor Flora!—and I shall be very very glad if the liking turns to love. Oh! to have one friend near me to whom I can turn!” and, to the astonishment and dismay of her husband, Maria broke down, and cried in a strong tempestuous way, as if her very heart would break.

He went to her side agitated and distressed; but when she saw him near, she drew aside, and went

off to her room, leaving him once more to wonder over the various extraordinary and inexplicable ways of womankind. How he had longed to console her, to tell her that she was wrong to doubt his love! Only the bitter consciousness of some truth lying underneath her statement, and the fear of a repulse, kept him helpless.

If this was her thought—if she had now seen one she thought might have made her happy, the danger for her was all the greater. What a tangle they were in! and what did the future hold for them both!

He was dull, she had said. Was it so? He must seem dull by her brilliancy. He knew that in all she said or did, there was a certain fascination for him which daily became more patent to him.

He thought of his position with a certain self pity, in which lay a pathetic and a comic side. If he had loved her and tried to win her, when other men might also have tried, how many fears he would

have had? All had been made easy to him, and he had found himself engaged to her without excitement or triumph. She was his wife, and he had fallen in love with her, and yet he acknowledged that now she was more difficult to win, and that his task seemed hopeless.

Never for a second did he wrong her by supposing that Horace Wyncote or any one else would ever make her swerve from right. But her very strength might be her weakness. Consciousness of her own integrity might lead her into compromising situations; and then he thought to himself bitterly that she had no safeguard as far as affection for himself went.

And if Horace Wyncote willingly or unwillingly became more to her than she now thought possible! Such things were. What a lifetime of misery for her and for him! The struggle between what was and what might have been seemed terrible to him. As to Flora Harrington, he never for one second

thought of her as likely to win Horace Wyncote's regard. He dismissed the idea without for a moment believing in its possibility. Then what lay before him? To try to win his wife. To bear with her pettishness, her anger, her caprices—to try to understand her. And if ever a man felt his deep ignorance of the complex nature of the feminine mind it was poor Mr. Burlington. In the meantime Maria was suffering from the reaction that invariably follows upon undue excitement.

She had a very real headache, and was lying prone on her sofa asking herself rather miserably where all was to end. A feeling of anger and resentment blinded her altogether, and those words about Flora had been cruelly harsh. She felt them "so harsh that when that buxom young person arrived to see what was wrong, she was received with demonstrative affection. "Poor Flora!" she sighed, "both you and I are misunderstood. But it does not matter, dear, I will always remain your friend."

"You are a darling," said Flora; "but who misunderstands me?"

"Does it matter? Tell me of something else. Oh, Flora! let me be quiet, and only hear of very pleasant things; I am so miserable!"

"Shall I tell you of my adventure this afternoon?" began Flora, in a cooing voice, dabbing Maria's head with eau de Cologne in a very perfunctory and inexperienced fashion, and sending uncomfortable splashes trickling down her face.

Maria drew her head away with a little gesture of impatience. "That is enough. Yes; tell me of your adventure. Imagine any adventure here!" said poor Maria in a very dreary voice.

"I met Mr. Wyncote, and, knowing that he was better out of the way while you were being scolded—Oh, you need not wince; I know all about it—I told him if he liked to ride with me there was one thing you wanted, and begged him to get for you."

"Flora! you did not, you could not say such a thing—tell a direct story!"

"I did. You see, one has at times to have very elastic principles," said Flora, with much complacency. "I told him of a peculiar moss and of red toadstools. Both grow in the long wood."

"His own wood, and miles from here."

"Yes, miles, as I know to my cost. Well, he seemed charmed; gave me to understand that picking toadstools was what he came into the world for, and picking them in my company. You can imagine the rest. You see, dear," continued Flora, with her usual formula, "I do not think I am wholly obnoxious to mankind in general, and to that man in particular. There are exceptions. However, this man and I got on very well indeed. He was very nice; particularly so. And he said charming things." She laughed in a very conscious way.

"Oh, Flora, did he say anything very particular?" exclaimed Mrs. Burlington, hoping, and yet not

quite allowing the possibility to herself. Her mind seemed confused, and in a state of chaos, and through all Flora's words that terrible beating of the temples went on and on.

"He didn't propose, if your roundabout phrase means that," said Flora: "fancy my allowing any man to propose all in a hurry like that. No," Flora continued, with an assumption of dignity that sat oddly upon her. "That is not my line."

"Do go on," said Mrs. Burlington, her head throbbing more as her excitement subsided.

"Well, we got there, and there were the mushrooms. I quite forgot to say, dear, that, knowing you would not mind, I had borrowed your new habit—that is to say, the safety skirt, the body won't fit, worse luck! Well, my dear Molly, I declined to get down because I felt quite sure if I once got down I should never get up again. Mr. Wyncote got down, and, as there was no tree near small enough to hook his bridle to (you

know the trees all run up there ridiculous lengths before they have branches), he said, as if I was quite up to it, would I hold his horse. I said 'Yes,' and if that horrible creature would only have stood still I should have been all right. But it did everything a horse could do short of eating me up. Of course, I could not hold the bridle, and away it went. The moment it went off, my horse kicked up and made a tremendous commotion. Mr. Wyncote called out 'Sit still,' or 'Sit tight,' or something equally ridiculous, as if I should not have been delighted to do so if I could! Well, of course, I was thrown off, just on a thick bed of moss, and away scampered my horse. I ask you whether it was not an adventure."

"My dear Flora, I am glad you were not hurt."

"But you don't understand. There was I on the ground, and my safety skirt (or, rather, yours) firmly sticking to the saddle."

"Poor Flora! How dreadful! What did you do?"

"Oh, I shut my eyes tight not to see myself; Mr. Wyncote caught the horses somehow, tied them up somehow, and came back to me, bringing that skirt."

"And you revived?"

"Certainly not; it was not time. Poor man, he did not know the geography of the thing, and he tried it upside down, and inside out, and finally spread it over me; and then I opened my eyes, because I was shaking with laughter, and could not keep it in much longer. I finally got into it when he went to get the horses. I was in a funk the whole way home, and got him to hold a rein, and he landed me at West Lodge gate. I think he was upset, had a fright, for he was silent all the time.

"Perhaps he was making up his mind to speak to you, Flora."

"Perhaps. Oh, by-the-bye, he is coming to tea to-morrow to bring your moss and things over."

“All right,” said Mrs. Burlington; but she thought that after the scene she had had with her husband it was all wrong. It looked like direct antagonism, and she was amazed. But how could she help it?

CHAPTER VIII.

“HOW CAN WE SET THINGS RIGHT?”

SIR HENRY BERYL felt the breach between himself and Cyril Burlington very much. He clung to old family friendships and family traditions more than most men; and when his first heat and indignation were over regret became still stronger. He blamed Cyril for having put a secret affecting his son at the mercy of his wife, considering that, however frank a man might choose to be with his wife about his own past, he might have kept so delicate a matter regarding a friend sacredly to himself; or, at any rate, have made her understand that she

was to hold her tongue about it. That Cyril had never made this confidence at all, he of course did not know. Cyril wrote no justification; there he was right, for how could such malicious words be justified? That the words capable of two interpretations were uttered ignorantly by Mrs. Burlington, from a foolish wish to annoy the Duchess for a moment, by hitting her friend, neither man knew.

Maria was not the only woman who, finding no weak spot in the armour worn by another woman, wounds her through a friend who is vulnerable, by attacking her or running her down. It was Marcia Dorington who alone did Cyril justice. She always remembered with gratitude the kindness and unselfishness that had prompted Mr. Burlington to risk offending her, to run the chance of being misunderstood, in order to tell her what his instinct taught him she knew nothing about. She knew—as what woman does not?—that Mr. Burlington was as much in love with her as a man of his

nature could be without encouragement, and that had she been able honestly to give him encouragement he would have tried to win her. When the Duchess, therefore, said something distinctly disparaging about him, Marcia had defended him, and much surprised the Duchess by doing so.

"You expect a man to have secrets from his wife?"

"His own secrets, perhaps other people's, after his marriage; but before No, Marcia. What a frightful confusion society would be in if men told their wives all about their friends' affairs! A man, I suppose, is more reticent when an inquisitive woman is tacked on to him, and his friends are or should be also reticent."

"I myself think that Mr. Burlington is what you call reticent," said Marcia, flushing a little, as the subject was always one of pain and humiliation to her.

"Quite impossible, dearest Marcia. How could his

wife otherwise know anything about you or your affairs?"

"It may not have been meant to hit me or my affairs?"

"You were not there: so you cannot know. She was quite in a small passion, and very much excited; her eyes flashed. She was angry; she wanted to annoy everyone all round."

"It makes me unhappy to think that it has divided Mr. Burlington from the Beryls and you," said Marcia, earnestly. "I wish you would put it all right."

"How can I? Things said cannot be unsaid; and what can I do; can I interfere?"

"You were present. You can put my views before Sir Henry. He is kind and just, and I should be so much happier. You do not know how much I feel for Cyril Burlington. He has done a generous thing, and it seems to me that for one bit of unkindness he is made to suffer too much."

"I cannot forgive his marrying that sort of wo-

man. My dear, she does not care one little bit for him!"

"Poor Cyril!"

"And though we know women to be the most contradictory creatures in the world, they generally, when they are free, marry to please themselves. Cyril Burlington has not married to please himself. He is not in love; he watches his wife; he is so evidently afraid of her saying or doing something indiscreet. You should see them together, my dear Marcia."

"She is very handsome?"

"Yes, very handsome, and has all sorts of personal attractions, but though she is handsome, and brilliant—even dazzling—one feels that Cyril would have been happier with less brilliancy and more repose. You have no idea how fatiguing she is."

"Perhaps in private life she may be less dazzling."

"Then she must be dull. No, my dear Marcia; Mrs. Burlington is a woman who must be first in

all society, and attract most attention; she resents taking a second place. This is, you see, the worst of being brilliant."

"You certainly have learned her by heart quickly enough."

"I pride myself on my insight into character." said the Duchess, gaily. "I am seldom wrong."

"Seldom, perhaps; but you are not always right," said Marcia, laughing. "However, the question now is this: How can we set things right?"

This conversation was one of many. Marcia's gratitude, contrary of that of many people, took an active and not a passive form. She was sincerely unhappy for many reasons. This unfortunate episode had deprived young Mr. Beryl of a friendship and companionship which she knew was the one comfort of his saddened life. And she was the innocent cause; she had suffered very cruelly, but things might have been worse; she might have said things difficult to unsay, and she in her heart

acknowledged that her peril had been great, and that Cyril's hand had been the means of saving her. Things often tend in one direction in a manner somewhat mysterious to those who do not remember that, after all, one influence dominates many people at the same moment.

Sir Henry Beryl, while seeing no way out of the complication, was not only as beforesaid vexed because of the loss of a friendship they all valued, but because the political cause at that juncture was just in need of such a man as Cyril Burlington. Perhaps the rarest character in the world certainly the easiest political character—is that of a man absolutely indifferent to popularity.

The applause of his fellow creatures is sweet to so many men, added to which the position of many men depends in a great measure on the popularity they possess. Cyril Burlington was very independent and it was reckoned a fault that he cared too little what other people thought or said of him.

It is a fault carried to excess, as it gives a bluntness of manner often, and an impression of not caring about vexing or wounding other people's susceptible feelings; and, like some virtues, becomes hateful especially to those who are conscious of an undue anxiety for popularity. It faces them in the light of a perpetual rebuke. But the character has its value, and there is no more powerful influence on the popular mind than one who has never been stirred an inch in any direction by self-interest. Altogether Sir Henry weighed in his mind a good deal how and where and when the unpleasant episode could be smoothed over; and each time he came to the same conclusion. Nothing could be done. It was Marcia herself who at length cut the Gordian knot, after much reflection and many anxious thoughts.

To interfere in a delicate matter requires tact and skill, and, above all, absolute straightforwardness; and in this instance it required help, and Marcia's

difficulty was, where she could get help! Who was there that was sufficiently interested in her wishes to be of use, and who would help without requiring explanations impossible to give. She scanned the horizon of her acquaintances, and invariably came back to the same idea. The Duchess, and the Duchess alone, could do it, and she was prejudiced; and if she could persuade her, would the Duke allow her to act? He was very cordial, very kind, but he was particular. Marcia felt so sure of the Duchess that she made up her mind that she would first get the Duke upon her side, and then speak to his wife. An opportunity is seldom sought in vain, and one day Marcia saw her opportunity and seized upon it at once.

The Duchess had a cold, and wanted to send a sympathetic present to a tenant's wife, living about five miles off. The Duke had announced an intention of going to see a new young plantation at that very place, and was to have driven his wife over.

But, her Grace being indisposed, she asked Marcia to take her place, and, as Marcia was devoted to riding, it ended in the horses being ordered, and the two started early in the afternoon—the groom, naturally, at a more discreet distance than he could well be in the phaeton.

“I am very glad to have your society all to myself to-day,” Marcia said brightly, after a preliminary canter had given the horses that exercise necessary to ensure quietness and the opportunity for conversation.

“Very flattering,” he answered, laughing. “What do you want me to do or not to do?”

“I want the Duchess to take me over to call upon the Burlingtons. I wish to make Mrs. Burlington’s acquaintance.”

“Humph,” said his Grace.

“‘Humph’ is not exactly a satisfactory reply, I may remark.”

“It is a tremendous distance. It is so far off we

are not at all called upon to pay a visit to the Burlingtons."

"It is a long way. But not too far if you can do a kindness. Please don't say 'humph' again. You were just going to do so!"

"What is your reason. Why do you want to go?" and the Duke looked round at his companion with some curiosity.

"Some time ago Cyril Burlington did me a great service, for which I shall always feel grateful. Very innocently as you will believe I have caused a breach between him and his friends—friends who value him much—and friends he values. He showed the moral courage which is more difficult to men than physical courage. I have a regard for him, and, owing him much, it is impossible for me to sit still with folded hands, and do nothing!"

"I see." The Duke had admired Mrs. Burlington, and having many important matters to think of, had forgotten her misdemeanour, or rather remembered

she had said something stupid, and that his wife objected to her in consequence.

"There is the Duchess yonder, Marcia."

"Yes; there is the Duchess. But if you will be on my side she will not stand out against my wish. Do you think she will?"

"She will act kindly; you know that," said his Grace loyally. "But if she thinks it against your interest?"

"Will you help me, Duke? I am not afraid if you will really help me," said Marcia very confidently.

"Oh, I will help you," he answered. They again cantered on, and when they pulled up again he said: "Mrs. Burlington looks to me like a woman who might be a very good sort if she knew it; and she makes enemies, because she gives no other woman a chance. She amused me, and she's very good-looking, but somehow, she and her husband don't pull together, and she shows it too much. Burling-

ton is such a good fellow that I really wish something could be done."

"It was a curious marriage," said Marcia. "I should like him to be happy, and he looks unhappy."

"He was too much in a woman's hands all his life. Well, Marcia, it's a bargain. Shall I propose it to the Duchess, or will you do it?"

"I shall be very glad if you will do it," said Marcia.

"All right, I will," he said, cordially.

And Marcia echoed the same words to herself. She was one who could not rest when action was necessary, and who relied for success on the purity of her actions.

She hoped much from the coming visit. At any rate, Cyril Burlington would understand that she had not forgotten, and that she was not ungrateful.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DUCHESS PAYS A VISIT.

DINNER was over, the servants had disappeared, and the Duchess, with immense satisfaction, was showing off a new accomplishment which she had taught her dog— a dog valuable from its grotesque ugliness and a strictly original way of moving.

Marcia was wrapped in reflections of a pleasant kind, and gave a rather half-hearted attention to the eager and admiring exclamations of her friend.

“Look, Marcia! isn’t he too clever? I put this raisin on his forehead, and another on his nose ; and he tosses his head when I raise one finger,

and catches both—at least, he caught them both once. Of course it requires practice. But he does it beautifully.”

“He ought to have compensating qualities,” said Marcia, laughing, “to make up for his wonderful want of beauty.”

“He is very ugly,” said the Duke, “let us hope he is clever; but I do not believe he will ever be a patch on Cyril Burlington’s dog. That dog of his does such extraordinary things.”

“What sort of things?” asked the Duchess very eagerly.

“He lies down with a handkerchief over his face, picking it off when he is told, and sits up holding it in his hands.”

“How wonderful!” said the Duchess, after a pause. “I wonder how he taught him to do that?”

“Better ask him,” said the Duke, quietly.

“But, my dear . . .” And the Duchess made all sorts of telegraphic signs to him, meaning to imply

that she could explain nothing in Marcia's presence, and that there was something to explain.

"I want you to go, and call there," said the Duke. "It is rather far, but I think it would be a kindness."

"But Marcia . . . you would I should have to go alone, and I do so hate a long drive by myself."

"I hoped the Duke would ask you," said Marcia. "I particularly want to go, and I knew if he saw it as I see it, and asked you to go, you would go."

"I will certainly go; but you are very forgiving," she said. "Mrs. Burlington said quite rude things about you; or, at any rate, was not nice in any way."

"Dear, I am convinced that she misunderstood things, and that in her turn she is being misunderstood. I want to set things right for them."

"Let us go, then. Now, if we want to do it quite comfortably, we had better write beforehand. It is a long way to go to find them out, and that

would not suit your purpose. Besides," added her Grace, very earnestly, "there is the dog. I do want to see that dog!"

Cyril was astonished when his wife showed him the note she had received from the Duchess. It was, he thought, most kindly meant—and he saw the kindness in its right light.

"Ask them to lunch; it is such a long way."

It may be noted that the Duchess, in the first place, taking for granted that every lady knew that the Duke was too busy to drive about with her, did not say he was not included in "we," and was so accustomed to have Marcia with her that she did not specify her.

Mrs. Burlington did ask the Duchess to luncheon, and of course included the Duke in her invitation under the "you," which corresponded with the Duchess's "we." Thus it happened that her invitation was accepted and the drive undertaken without Marcia's name coming to the front at all.

When they arrived Marcia said to her friend, "Please do not name me, dear. I will introduce myself by-and-by."

Maria was very much struck by the distinguished figure and fine face of the Duchess's companion. From the evident intimacy existing between the two ladies, she supposed that they were relations. Marcia never for one moment occurred to her. It may be said that never did Mrs. Burlington look better. Her recent illness had not impaired her beauty, and she was pleased by the long drive undertaken by the Duchess, which she thought showed friendliness. Altogether she was at her best. The Duchess, naturally, was so full of Mr. Burlington's dog that she left Marcia to Mrs. Burlington, and the two got on well together. It was after luncheon when in the sitting-room that Marcia disclosed herself. She said, looking at a rather fine picture of Mrs. Burlington, "Your husband once did me a great service, Mrs. Burlington—a service I shall always

feel grateful for. Has he ever spoken to you about me? I am Marcia Dorington."

Mrs. Burlington lost her presence of mind. She flushed a vivid red, and said, in an odd, constrained voice, "He never spoke of doing you a service. He has never spoken about you at all."

"Not at all?"

"Never beyond perhaps naming you with others. It seems to me, Miss Dorington, that it would be very extraordinary of a husband to speak to his wife . . . for my husband to speak about you to me!"

"Why?" and Marcia's wonderful eyes were fixed with no feigned expression of astonishment upon Mrs. Burlington's face.

"Because," said Maria, hotly, "he cared for you. Even now . . ." She stopped, but she had said enough.

Then Marcia understood. Before more words passed Mrs. Burlington said, "I have often wondered why you . . ."

“Why I did not care for, or, plainly, why I did not love your husband?” She added, in a low tone, “There was someone else, and the service—the great service your husband rendered me—was in connection with that other person. He saved me much! O! Mrs. Burlington, your husband is very noble, very good, and he never told you; he kept my secret and my counsel. How can I thank him!”

“I could not understand. I thought you had loved him—of course, before he married; and it has made me unhappy,” Maria said, simply.

“Now you know, and you know also how loyal he has been! Dear Mrs. Burlington, I hope you will come to like me, that we may grow to be friends,” said poor Marcia, who had believed nothing against Cyril, and who yet felt grateful to his wife, for proving her right, and confirming her belief in his honour. She held out her hand, and Mrs. Burlington took it graciously enough. In the

face of this friendliness she could not say what was really in her heart—"He ought to have told me ; I am his wife."

"Then we are friends," said Marcia, and as she spoke she smiled, and Mrs. Burlington brightened under the influence of that smile, and Marcia hoped that she had conquered her antagonism. Flora, who had been much subdued at luncheon, and a little less subdued afterwards, was overjoyed to see the two friends go away ; but Mrs. Burlington was not in the humour to abuse anybody, least of all the woman who had gone out of her way to come to remove an erroneous impression ; and she soon left Flora to her own devices.

The Duchess and her friend drove home together in silence. Marcia was glad to be left to think. It is invariably a surprise to a woman who is conscious of a man's admiration for her, and even of so much liking as may turn to love (expressed or unexpressed), to see his second choice the exact

opposite of herself. Between husband and wife there was evidently not even cordial sympathy. What had weighed with him? If he had not been in love, why had he married Miss Kingson? She could understand an orphan, dependent, and holding a very insecure position, being glad to have an assured position and a husband who was *sans peur et sans reproche*. But Cyril? How could it be accounted for?

She knew his character thoroughly, and it puzzled her because at his age a choice is generally so carefully made. It is your young man who falls in love, and has that fever so badly that he sees everything through its magic glasses. She was sorry, for she liked him so much, and he was a noble-hearted man who wanted affection, who appreciated repose more than brilliancy, and who craved for domestic quiet and a real affection. It seemed hard that he should have been debarred from these things.

When they reached home the problem in Marcia's mind was: How could she clear Cyril in the eyes of the Beryls without opening up too widely again her own story? That she had been an object of jealousy seemed to lower her; she must think it all out.

When Cyril was alone with his wife, she looked up in the sudden way he had learned to know by this time portended some new departure, and said abruptly,

"If you were more frank with me, Cyril, I should not make so many mistakes."

Cyril looked at her in some surprise. "This is grave," he said, smiling a little.

The smile vexed her. It was always a vexation to her that her husband never sympathised with her moods. And she forgot that her moods were variable as any barometer in changeable weather, and very difficult to follow.

"At Sir Henry Beryl's I made a mistake. It was not my fault, as I did not know anything. Miss

Dorington explained to me to-day. She told me that you had done her a service. I like her, she did not wish me to misunderstand you."

Cyril was grave enough now. "Will you let me know about the misunderstanding, and what she explained."

This was a little difficult; and his wife felt as many people feel when they rush into a fray unprepared to bear the brunt of it. She almost wished she had left things alone.

"Miss Dorington said that it was not you, it was some one else, that she cared for."

"I am afraid I cannot follow this very lucid explanation," said Cyril, who was really rather anxious to know what Marcia had said.

Maria coloured deeply, and her answer was given in a lower tone, and with a good deal of hesitation: "I thought you had loved each other, and were for some reason parted; and I wanted people—I wanted the Duchess to know that I was not blind. As you loved Miss Dorington, the Beryls naturally

could not ask her to meet your wife. This is what I thought when I offended them all."

"That was it, was it?" her husband answered, looking at her a little curiously. "And you cared?"

She gave no answer, but her colour varied. He would not press her for an answer, and went on after a momentary pause. "And then what more did she say?"

"She said you were good, and had done her a great service, that you had done someone she cared for a great service, or words to that effect. At any rate, it was not to avoid you."

"I see," said Mr. Burlington.

Yes; he saw what this meant. He had quite misunderstood his wife, and the speech that rang so clearly, and so painfully through the Beryl's drawing-room, and had destroyed in a second of time the friendship of years, had been prompted by jealousy; and was absolutely innocent of the meaning so naturally put upon it.

It was bitter to feel that even now explanation was impossible.

How could he rake up all that story after so long a time? Would it not be giving fresh importance to what he hoped time would obliterate or at least soften. Then the injustice regarding his wife struck him. It was a wrong towards her to leave anyone under the belief that she was capable of wilfully touching upon so delicate a subject. Wherever he looked he appeared to see fresh complications, and disentanglement seemed quite hopeless. So momentary an outburst, and so many unfortunate consequences! Thoughts such as these flashed through his mind, and kept him once more silent.

His wife stood up suddenly. "I did not answer your question," she said, looking quite straight into his face. "I did care," And she went away quickly, leaving him perplexed and surprised, but with a warmer glow at his heart, which had so long now been chilled by her open indifference.

The visit of the Duchess had also consequences, though of a different kind. People suddenly remembered that they had not called on the Burlingtons for a long time, and Maria had many visitors. For in certain societies people are very like sheep, not only in the way they follow a beaten track, but in the manner in which they hold their heads and faces upwards when the weather is fine, and there are no clouds about; or turn their backs to the storm and go away from it. All this time Horace Wyncote was a frequent visitor. Having proved to be so wrong in one thing regarding his wife, Mr. Burlington could not bear saying more to her about these visits. But he did not believe that Flora was the attraction.

His position was difficult, because he had established indifference and had accepted it from his wife. There was no intimacy, and they saw little of each other. Outwardly, all was harmonious. Indeed, there were fewer ruffles on the domestic surface

than is usually the case where confidence in each other's affection leads to very open home-truths sometimes, and forcible differences of opinion. To recede from this position was extremely difficult, and Mrs. Burlington found it impossible.

It was just then that Mrs. Kingson wrote to propose herself for a visit of some days. Her husband, who was going to see a model agricultural farm in a county farther north, would pick her up on his way home and stay for a couple of days. Maria had a great regard for her aunt, who had always made much of her, but she was a little sorry that she was coming just now.

It was inexpressibly annoying to her that a very acute observer should be able to see the position of things as Mrs. Kingson would see them. And there was also Flora. But there was no help for it. The Kingsons had often been asked, and this was their first visit.

Maria remembered that there was also Horace

Wyncote, who so unaccountably delayed proposing to Flora. And she was beginning to dislike his visits. It seemed to her that he made a point of always coming when her husband was out. Why should he? It put her too much in the position of receiving into the intimacy of her homelife a man whom her husband would not make a companion of and did not approve of.

It was true her husband was not very cordial. Perhaps when the Kingsons were there Wyncote would not come quite as often, and Flora must bear the loss of his society as best she could. Perhaps, also, the arrival of her uncle and aunt would cause Flora to move. She hated herself for the thought; but, when honestly thinking over everything, Mrs. Burlington acknowledged to herself that the long visit of that young lady had not been an unmixed joy, or given her entire satisfaction; she would not regret her departure nearly as much as she would have done a few weeks ago.

CHAPTER X.

AN ARRIVAL AND A DISAPPOINTMENT.

THE day Mrs. Kingson was expected, Mrs. Burlington and Flora had something as nearly approaching to a quarrel as could be. Mrs. Burlington, able to move about once more, and quite well again, had resumed her active habits, and had made some unpleasant discoveries. She was passionately fond of flowers, and really understood them. There were in particular two that she was specially fond of, and that she took personally real trouble to have in good succession—violets and lilies-of-the-valley; and she had arranged to have these fragrant blooms

almost all the year round. There were hotbeds full of the pale double violets, pots of giant Czar, and many hundred pots of lilies-of-the-valley.

She was quite unrestricted as to expense, Mr. Burlington being glad to provide funds in so innocent a direction, and to give her pleasure. That morning she had discovered, to her extreme annoyance, that every violet had been picked so ruthlessly as to strew the ground with dying buds and young shoots. The lilies-of-the-valley were all plucked also. Only flowers wanting another fortnight to come to perfection stared her in the face. Mrs. Burlington looked at them blankly, and saw Malcolm's face, which betrayed nothing. The smile with which he used to greet her was nowhere visible.

"Where are the violets? And why are there no lilies in bloom?"

"You must just ask yon missy," said Malcolm.

"Miss Harrington?"

"I don't ken her name, but she'd ruin any garden,

and I am just to give it up. I'm fair driven daft with her and her ways!"

"She promised me not to touch the hothouse flowers; to ask you for all she wanted. I cannot understand it!"

"There's a good deal you will not understand about that young missy," said Malcolm, very shortly, and with an angry laugh.

"But why let her rob the hotbeds in this way?"

"She says hotbeds are not hothouses; and when she said you wanted them what could I say?"

"There has been some mistake," said Mrs. Burlington, trying to be loyal to her friend.

"There's been more than one, I'm thinking," answered the old Scot, cynically. "Na, na, Mistress Burlington. I misdoubted the young leddy all along. No one with any scrap of a conscience would misuse flowers as she does. I'm thinking you can have a few violets if you'll come with me."

He led the way through the garden gates to the

outer part, where, carefully concealed under a big cabbage leaf, lay a big bunch of violets.

Mrs. Burlington took them, and went straight to find Flora. She was very indignant. Had the girl always been like this, selfish, thoughtless, ill-bred, or was it that her own sense of right had grown stronger and her present surroundings had raised her standard?

"Flora, what possessed you to destroy my violets!" she exclaimed, as they met at the front door.

"Destroy your violets! I have destroyed no violets; I have only picked them."

"You have ruined the violet beds. Besides, I never gave you leave to take all my flowers; and there are the lilies-of-the-valley, also, all gone."

"I never supposed you to be so selfish as to keep these things for yourself," said Flora, coolly, with a much-injured air. "They were wasting their sweetness on the desert air, and I really think it a little hard that you should make such a fuss about it."

Mrs. Burlington was very angry. "I have recovered these," she said, holding up the last bunch the poor beds would give for some time. "What did you intend to do with them? You do not wear them."

At this inopportune moment Mr. Wyncote's tall figure appeared, and he hurried his steps as he saw Mrs. Burlington.

"For goodness' sake, Molly, let me have the violets, and I'll explain everything afterwards," exclaimed Flora, in a low voice. "You will ruin all my hopes if you don't."

Mrs. Burlington turned, and went into the house. She threw the bunch of violets on the hall table, and went away, resolved that some steps should be taken to put an end to what was becoming a very real annoyance to her. If need be, she would even appeal to her husband. Flora met Mr. Wyncote with a pouting smile, and gave him the violets.

"Mrs. Burlington did not stay to see me?" said

Mr. Wyncote, carelessly accepting the flowers from Flora. "What a curious contradiction she is!"

"We had better go into the park," said Flora. "I have much to say to you."

He looked far from lover-like as he followed her; but Maria, from her sitting-room window, saw him go, violets in hand, and felt relieved. "Surely, that must come all right in time," she said, aloud. And, happily convinced that all was safe as far as he was concerned, she went to see Aunt Anne. She was a little restless; and the time seemed long to her as it always does when an arrival is impending, and the arrival is one fraught with consequences to ourselves. But, once beside Aunt Anne, restlessness seemed to become soothed and to grow quiet. That peaceful, happy, serene nature shed some of its peace around it, and no greater proof could well be given of the change in young Mrs. Burlington than that she had now gone to Aunt Anne for advice about Flora Harrington and Mr. Wyncote.

Aunt Anne heard everything patiently, sympathetically, and without interruption.

"Now, Aunt Anne, what can I do; what ought I to do? It really cannot go on any longer!"

"Have you consulted Cyril, my dear?"

"No. Cyril is prejudiced. He dislikes all the Wyncotes so much. He really is rather unjust to this young man."

"Do you think that he shows good taste in coming to the house when the master dislikes his society, and shows it? I suppose he does show it?"

"He certainly does when they meet," and Mrs. Burlington laughed a little. "But Mr. Wyncote invariably comes when he is out. It is the most curious thing! If there is a meeting, or my husband has to attend to some business away from home, Mr. Wyncote invariably appears. One would really believe that some one told him when he was to be out."

“Possibly some one does tell him,” said Aunt Anne, very quietly.

“Flora? I doubt it, because at present the love is more on his side than hers, though I am sure that she is in love with him.”

“Miss Harrington says that he is in love with her?”

“Yes. I believe he has told her so frequently, but he has never asked her to marry him.”

“And never will, my dear.”

“Never will! Oh, dear Aunt Anne, please do not prophesy ill to poor Flora.”

“You would feel sorry, then, if this affair ended in nothing?”

“So very sorry. Poor Flora somehow does not get on. I can quite see her faults, but I am sorry for her; and she cannot live here always.”

“I am glad you have come to this conclusion,” Aunt Anne said, quaintly. “Frankly, my dear, I am not at all a competent person to give you

advice, because I so thoroughly disapprove of Flora Harrington. I do not for a moment wish to be unjust, but she is not the style of young lady I care about. She is not at all like you, my dear."

"And you do care for me a little? You are very good, Aunt Anne."

"My advice to you, dear, is to go straight to your husband, and put the matter before him. You think Mr. Wyncote is paying meaningless attentions to Miss Harrington?"

"I do not know what to think," said poor Maria, frankly. "Judging from what she says, he does mean to propose to her. From what I have seen, I am afraid he means nothing of the kind. When I am there he takes quite as much—even more—pains to recommend himself to me than he does to her; and this annoys me."

"I can quite imagine that."

"Aunt Anne, what have the Wyncotes done? Why does my husband object to them all so much?"

Then, seeing that the old lady did not answer, she continued, slowly, and in a tone of very real feeling, "I sometimes fear there is some secret connected with the family I ought to know—a disgraceful secret—but why am I to be treated as a child? If there is something, I ought to know it!" she said, insistently, with a certain pathos in her voice.

"I think so, too," said Aunt Anne. "I have said so to Cyril."

"Then there is some secret?"

"Yes," said Aunt Anne. "But, my dear, you must in this accept the leading of your husband. Knowing it would make you very unhappy, for your own sake, he says nothing!"

"Oh, he is wrong," exclaimed Mrs. Burlington, passionately, "and it is hard for me." Then she added, loyally, making an effort over herself that Aunt Anne fully appreciated, "If he does not wish me to know, I cannot honourably try to find out. But it is hard."

She remained thoughtful for a time, and as the carriage was announced to take her to the station to meet her aunt she left. On both sides regard and affection increased day by day, and it had come to this now—that Aunt Anne actually blamed her nephew, and blamed him severely, for being so indifferent, so blind, to his wife's merits.

Mrs. Kingson, with her charming manner, her fresh dresses, and her soft speeches, was a new instance to Maria of how much she must have changed. For her aunt's speeches sounded untrue in her ears. Her manner, she thought, was affected, and she appeared overdressed. How bitterly she took herself to task need not here be related. But the fact remained.

"My dear, sweet child, what a treat to see you again! And, my dear, how lovely you are looking! This carriage yours? How delightful! What beautiful horses! What a lovely part of the world! How lucky you are! I do trust, my dear, you appreciate your blessings!"

"Which?" asked Maria, laughing, as they drove along. "My looks, the carriage, the horses, or the loveliness of the country, for I do not think that lovely?"

"Dearest child—everything." The lodge gate was open, and they drove in, and her admiration redoubled. "Well, my own dear child, all I can say is that I knew I had done well for you, but I never realised how well till now!"

This speech jarred terribly on Mrs. Burlington. Only the consciousness of Mrs. Kingson's vague manner of asserting things restrained her from an open and direct questioning which would have led there and then to much that might have been unpleasant. With Mr. Burlington Mrs. Kingson's tactics were very different. She admired the old carving in the hall, the arrangement of the big rooms opening one into another, and filled with flowers and beautiful pictures, rare china, and all the collections of the many generations who had

money and good taste. But the burden of her song to him was that it must be a delightful reflection to him that his wife with her great beauty and perfect taste was so charming and beautifully in keeping with every one of the surroundings. Mr. Burlington gave reserved answers, and Mrs. Kingson had the enthusiasm to herself. Maria avoided her husband's eyes when she returned from leaving her aunt and the two pale and very plain girls upstairs to rest till tea-time.

But the consciousness that he was looking at her made her at length look up. His first words were kindly. "You must be glad to have your aunt with you. She is looking very well."

"Yes. I think she is somehow changed."

"Has she? She is very much the person I have always known her."

"Then, perhaps, I have changed."

"Perhaps. You were always very fond of her, were you not? Very intimate. Like mother and daughter?"

He was watching her attentively.

Maria was puzzled by his manner and by his questions. "It is so difficult for me to know about the intimacy between a mother and daughter; but I know she was always kind. Perhaps she showed kindness in her own way, more than in studying what I liked. Cyril, it is very sad to be motherless!"

Her eyes filled with tears, and her husband rose to stand nearer her, when a servant entered with a note that required an immediate answer.

Cyril was provoked, and his wife was relieved. She was at that moment suffering from a sense of the great disappointment which her aunt's presence had brought with it; and of late, since her tedious recovery from the effects of her fall, she had often tried to lay the blame of all she felt to be wrong upon the deprivation of a mother's care and affection. Then the words of her aunt came persistently back to her memory. What did they mean? How could Mrs. Kingson have "done well" for her?

Cyril had been passionately in love with her, and how was Mrs. Kingson mixed up in that? She resolved to get an explanation at no distant day.

She counted it very unfortunate that Mr. Wyncote came to tea, and that Flora appeared at her very worst that afternoon."

But she was thunderstruck at the effect Mr. Wyncote's arrival had upon Mrs. Kingson. Nothing could look more harmonious than the five o'clock tea party, with the exquisitely fine lace tea-cloth, beautiful china, and pretty service upon which the capricious flames of a very cheery wood fire played fitfully. Mrs. Kingson, who was a Sybarite and enjoyed luxurious repose, was thoroughly enjoying herself, her only drawback being the anxiety about the cakes equally enjoyed by her daughters."

"Dora, my love, hot cake is so pernicious; think of your figure and your complexion."

"Yes, mother; but a journey makes one so hungry."

"Then, my child, eat toast."

"Yes, mother," and Dora calmly went on eating cake, and her mother said no more.

It seemed to Mrs. Burlington as if it was only yesterday since she had heard those same words and answered in the same way.

Then Flora would be so absurd and so tiresome. She quite took the line of doing the honours to Mrs. Kingson, called her attention to one thing and another, patronised the girls, and succeeded in driving Mrs. Kingson into a white heat of indignation.

If she had not been annoyed for her aunt's sake no one would have been more thoroughly amused than Maria herself. The warfare was like the buzzing of an intrusive midge which it is impossible to get rid of, and whose sting is more irritating than painful, but long continued reduces you to abject despair.

"Nice rooms these, Mrs. Kingson? See that branch of red maple leaves? My idea; breaks that rigid

line there; you admire the way the room is arranged? Yes, I never rested till we got the sofa out of that corner, as Mr. Burlington never flirts, and Molly is kept in great order. Where was the use! If I flirt, I do it openly. I thought you must have forgotten all that sort of iniquity long ago, I dare say you did the same."

"I quite fail to comprehend you, Miss Errington."

"My name is Harrington. No one has given me the chance of changing it, worse luck!"

"That seems curious," said Mrs. Kingson, anxious to be a little repressive, even a little nasty, to this aggressive young person. "I know so little of girls. I married so young myself."

"So I can quite imagine," said Flora, with most open impertinence. "Men never much care about clever girls. As a fact they are afraid of them; the other sort always marry young." What might have followed is unknown to any one, for Mr. Wyncote was just then announced, and Mrs. King-

son absolutely paled as she heard his name, and betrayed so much astonishment that Maria once more felt that mixed up with the family was some tremendous secret, and that she herself in some way or other was more affected by that secret than any one else.

She resolved that at no distant day she would find out everything.

CHAPTER XI.

A COMING STORM.

MARCIA DORINGTON, very loyal to her friends, and having that sense of gratitude which human nature is so often accused of being without, took serious thought about the knot of difficulty and misconception which was keeping lifelong friends apart on her account. She had conceived a better and higher opinion of Mrs. Burlington than she had somehow been led to believe possible, though the wonder always remained as to what had been the attraction in Mr. Burlington's eyes, and why it had so completely gone. She had that unfeigned interest in him

which all good women have for a man whom (supposing the affections free) they might have married.

And Marcia knew that if she had not loved unwisely, if she had known everything before she had allowed herself to love Charlie Beryl, she could have loved and been very happy with Cyril Burlington. He had an affectionate temper, was full of intellectual resources, and, above all, was appreciative; and it is this quality of appreciation which, almost more than anything else, carries a woman through the trials and storms of life, and enables her to bear cheerfully sufferings, privations, and all else.

It is the want of that appreciation which breaks down a man and a woman equally. To toil all day, and find that all that toil is taken for granted; to suffer without repining, and find the effort unrecognised, and to receive no kindly words; to be allowed to feel that it is only a matter of course—this failure of recognition, which increases with

years, destroys home happiness more than anything. For it is real appreciation which increases affection and which leads to open recognition, and makes a human being feel capable of any sacrifice. Marcia, while never fencing with herself, honestly allowing that she loved young Beryl too deeply ever to put any one in his place, thought it no disloyalty to him to place Mr. Burlington very high up in her estimation. She thought of him so well that she must try to serve him now.

For many, many months she had not seen Mr. Beryl, and only once in all that time had she written to him. Her letter, then, had been written because she wished him to understand that he must be a friend, and only a friend, and that the affectionate footing he was anxious to remain upon was impossible for her, and, indeed, was not to be thought of. She had cleared him from all blame. He had thought that she knew everything. That she did not know was her fault, and not his. He had read and re-read her

letter, which, while resolute enough, was full of very real sympathy, and he took comfort finally from what at first had filled him with despair—her saying that it was impossible for her to pretend that she could remain on an affectionate footing, and that they had better not meet. He had drifted into a position with her which might have been fatal to both. Calling it friendship and Platonic liking, and all else, he found that when the wrench had been made, his eyes were opened, and he knew then that he had sinned, and very deeply, towards her. And she had forgiven him.

Her letter now was a very simple and womanly letter. She dwelt amusingly on the jealousy of Mrs. Burlington, explained the object of her visit there, and touched very lightly on the fact of Mrs. Burlington's ignorance and Cyril's silence. She let him draw his own inferences. "I hope," she said at last, "that you will all try to see something of him. He is too much without man's society where

he is, and he is one of the men who are so true and so loyal that he is a friend worth keeping."

Mr. Beryl understood, and showed the letter to his father and the others; and they also understood. "We have wronged him," said Sir Harry, "and we must try to make amends."

In this way Cyril's path was made easy for him, and just when he was worrying himself to try to find some way of putting things right for his wife he found no explanation necessary. Everything was cleared up. No explanation was necessary as far as the Beryls were concerned, who in some way had come to know the truth. But Cyril found his wife's inquiries and her surprise very much more difficult to answer in any way that was satisfactory to her.

It was only natural that it should be so. Taking things lightly as she did, Mrs. Burlington still was capable of feeling any slight when she realised that a slight had been offered.

The way in which she had been hurried away

from the Beryls that morning always remained very vividly in her memory; that Cyril had been dreadfully displeased, that she had been ill, and had lost her baby—all these things, not unnaturally, made her resent renewed friendship and cordial invitations without excuses. Afterwards her husband remembered the rigid look in her face when he had told her of Sir Harry's letter. He could not blame her when she refused to go, and when she expressed her surprise in strong terms.

“I am not going to be taken up and put down as they choose,” she said. “There is another mystery! Why am I to be treated as a child incapable of understanding, or as an indiscreet woman to whom her husband's affairs are not on any account to be divulged? I know that everything that concerns me is kept from me, and that I am to be lulled in a fool's paradise! I refuse to be so treated! Go to Sir Harry Beryl's, and simply say that I decline to return to the house from which I was

so discourteously dismissed. You cannot blame me!"

"No; I cannot blame you; but it was my doing, not his."

"Besides, I have another good reason for staying here. There is my aunt; of course I cannot leave her. But you need not put that forward; I would far rather you simply stated the truth. I always try to speak the truth," she said, proudly; "I leave prevarication to others."

Cyril had never admired her more.

"I am in your hands," he said; "I will not go if you have the smallest feeling about my going."

"You must do what you think right," she answered; "I have no feeling about it as regards you."

"I can go for one night."

"Why shorten your stay?"

"You are sure that you will not forgive and come. They are my oldest friends, and circumstances change."

"Nothing is changed," she said, a little hardly.

"Nothing. I have done and undone nothing. What my offence was I do not know, and, not knowing, how can I repent? I have done no harm willingly, and I do not choose to be forgiven."

And Cyril knew that she was right. It was simply one of those unfortunate things for which there seemed to be no remedy. Honestly, things were hard for her; he would get leave to explain all to her. And yet he felt it absolutely impossible to take Aunt Anne's advice, and tell her all there was to tell her about herself.

If she loved him, how easy all would have been! But as things were between them, if she ever came to know the truth, and learned that her position had appealed to his compassion, the consequences would be disastrous. The feud between Mrs. Kingston and Flora went on, making a sort of under-current accompaniment to life at Burlington Manor, which sometimes amazed and sometimes amused Maria. And it may fairly be said that Mrs. King-

son brought a good deal upon herself. She never left things alone, and used to remember afterwards answers she might have given, and things she might have said, and lose her temper because those words had not come to her at the right moment. She had other reasons for being out of temper. There is no open ingratitude more flagrant than the ingratitude of a woman who has achieved a good position and a prosperous marriage through the means of another woman, whether that other is or is not a relation.

The reason is obvious. No woman will ever allow that any consideration has weighed with the man she marries beyond the direct one of her own perfections and the passion she has inspired. She resolutely ignores any other. Everyone knows how much other people have in their power with regard to the making or marring of a marriage, but that is not to say that the person who wins ever acknowledges it or believes a patent fact applicable to herself. Mrs. Kingson took much credit

to herself. She had shown tact and kindness, and a real desire to befriend her husband's niece. She felt justified in being pleased at her having "managed" the whole thing so well. Having achieved what she had felt to be so desirable, she thought it hard that her efforts should be so completely ignored; now it was harder still to see Maria accepting all the good gifts she (under Providence, of course) had brought her as if she had won them by dint of very superior merit; and, having got them, treat them as a matter of course, and even make light of them.

Mrs. Kingson knew that she could not so treat them, that the luxury and wealth would be to her far dearer than they apparently were to her niece, and she was watching for some opportunity of bringing her good fortune home to her, and of saying, in roundabout terms, "You owe all this to me." At the very bottom of this lay a strenuous desire to annoy and vex Flora Harrington. It

had been unwise of Maria to allow Flora to prolong her visit, which was oppressive even to her now, and which she knew bored her husband. But when she saw the stand taken by Mrs. Kingson it made her obstinate, and the words she had intended to say to Flora remained unsaid.

Things were what diplomatists call "a little strained," when Mr. Burlington, after a brief correspondence with the Beryls, having fixed a day for his visit there, announced to the assembled party the hour of his departure.

Maria was evidently as much in ignorance of this as the others, and she was not pleased at having been told it in this fashion. But, after an involuntary betrayal of her annoyance, she tried to conceal her chagrin, launched out into an amusing account of all she intended to do during his absence, and was brilliant, witty, and her old self, apparently without a care.

Then injudicious Mrs. Kingson gave her a feeling

of intense irritation against her husband by condoling with her for having been put into a position of some embarrassment.

"You poor, dear child! It was quite a surprise to you, I saw. But, my dearest Maria, what does it mean? Where is the confidence between husband and wife I expected to find? Your husband ought to have told you his plans privately, my dear; he ought, indeed."

"Well, you see, he did not do so. Of course, I knew he was going."

"Very odd, my dear; very odd. I do trust and hope, Maria, you fully appreciate your excellent husband. Ah! my dear, when I think what might have been! And at one time how difficult it was to manage!"

Then Mrs. Burlington rose up in wrath, and in a voice she could barely control, she said, "It is exactly that I want to know, and, that I am quite determined to know. What is there in the story of my life different from other lives?"

“My dear Maria!”

“Why should I be more grateful to my husband than other women are expected to be to their husbands?”

“Who said so?” asked Mrs. Kingson, feebly. Having brought this storm about she now wished heartily she had left it alone.

“You have!”

“I said so! my dear Maria!”

“In a thousand indirect ways—by a thousand insinuations and numberless allusions. My husband, I suppose, wished to marry me; what do you mean by managing it, and where was the difficulty?” Mrs. Burlington controlled herself, and spoke calmly. But her eyes were full of indignant fire, and quelled Mrs. Kingson, who was, it may be said, only too easily quelled, and a thorough moral coward.

“My dearest child, you quite upset me,” she said, peevishly; “you really take one up so quickly, and in a hurry one uses words.”

"The words must seem just to you since you use them," said Maria. "The day you came you implied, as we drove up the avenue, that I was in your debt. What did you mean?"

"Good gracious, my dear; I meant—nothing! Why twist and turn all I say?"

"It seems to me that you twist and turn. But, I tell you frankly, Aunt Kingson, I cannot live as I am living now! I intend to find out—everything. I am determined to know that and all else; and, if you will not tell, there are others who will."

"My dear Maria! I do not think that you are treating me kindly or nicely;" and Mrs. Kingson feebly began to shed a few tears. "I have always tried to be affectionate to you. I grudged nothing, and I always liked you, my dear, I did my best for you always."

"You have always shown me kindness, and I am grateful for that kindness. I often wish now that your kindness had not always taken the form of flattery. But you flatter everyone."

“Good gracious, my dear—flattery?”

“Yes; all I did was said to be right. But that has nothing to do with what I want to know. What I want to know now is this—what is the story of my life? and in what way is my position different from that of other girls in my own rank in life? And what do you mean by having ‘managed so well’?” said young Mrs. Burlington. “And I intend you to tell me these things.”

CHAPTER XII.

PERPLEXITIES.

JUST as Mrs. Kingson was getting into a state bordering on despair, an interruption occurred by what she considered a special intervention of Providence. She was one of the people who thought that Providence did assist her plans, and considered herself at those moments as very specially under its protection.

The providential intervention at this moment was the arrival of a telegram from her husband. Sooner than he had thought possible he could get away, and he was to arrive at the station that day.

“And in an hour from now! My dear child, is it quite convenient? Can you send? I should so like you to meet my husband. But if it is not convenient?”

“It is quite convenient. I am glad he is coming, as you fence and turn all my questions aside. He will, perhaps, be more reasonable. He will explain everything!”

Mrs. Kingson affected not to hear. But as she left the room she said significantly, and in a voice which was full both of fretfulness and irritation, “You had better be warned by me. You have a good position; everything to make a woman happy. Knowing what you call ‘everything’ will not add to your happiness. It may destroy it!” The rustle of her dress as she went down the corridor, with its sweeping, swishing noise, died away before Mrs. Burlington changed her attitude.

Her eyes were clouded with anxiety. She went back upon her married life, and started to find how much more her husband was to her now than he

had been when, with a feeling almost of condescension, she had married him. How lightly and thoughtlessly she had undertaken those vows; and all her plans—those plans by which he was to owe his advancement—all the halo her brilliancy was to throw around him—what had it all resulted in? She had for some reason been an evident drawback to him. The county neighbours had dropped away from them, and formality had taken the place of friendliness. His political hopes were destroyed through her; and his great friendship with the Beryls—that also was imperilled in some way, and by her fault. What had she done?

She sank into a chair, and stared out of the open window without seeing anything. She knew that her husband had become to her, by slow and insensible degrees, an object of sincerest respect, even of deep regard. To live with a nature always unselfish, always even-tempered, or, at any rate, with a temper so completely under control as to appear

even; to find him so absolutely true and loyal that he never allowed a shadow of blame to rest upon her, because she was his wife, never to reproach her, to forgive her vanity, her thoughtless speeches, and to make allowances for her.

And with all this came the terrible conviction that he did not really love her, and that he, as well as she herself, missed something in their lives—that something which sanctifies a home, and fills a commonplace existence with beauty. After all, what had she done either to win or to keep his love, and what love had she given him?

The acquaintance with Marcia Dorington had been a new experience to her. The repose and quiet charm of manner, the absolute unconsciousness which can only exist with self-oblivion, spoke forcibly to Mrs. Burlington, who was herself always anxious to impress other people, and to dazzle them by a brilliancy which was her characteristic. She felt forlorn when she reflected that her husband was

going to be absent for some days; and she thought it strange that it should be so, because she was self-reliant. Then came the confused wonder, which, poor thing! was only natural. She was expected to be in a perpetual state of gratitude for every common civility shown her.

Why?

Even her husband, though he had endeavoured to do away with the impression his words gave her, had said that it was "extremely kind" of the Duchess to call. As if she had not probably called upon everyone else within a certain radius. Why was a civility she was entitled to from one of her friends to be put down as a kindness?

In the midst of these perplexing thoughts Flora arrived upon the scene, and Maria was not sorry to have an opportunity of speaking to her. She wanted to know what her plans were, and she wished to entreat her to change her manner to Mrs. Kingson during the remainder of her stay.

"Am I an interruption?" asked Flora, dropping her plump person on a low-footed stool, and, as usual, biting her pouting red lips to enhance their redness.

"No, Flora; I wanted to see you. I wanted to speak to you, dear."

"Are you going to scold me? because, if you are, I shall run away at once!" and Flora shook her fat shoulders, and looked more impudent than usual.

"I am not going to scold you, but I want to know something. Tell me what are your plans?"

"My plans! good gracious! I never made a plan in my life," and Flora laughed very noisily. "Why do you want to know?"

"Frankly, Flora (you must not be offended with me), but I wanted to know when you thought of going home?"

"I am not in the very least offended with you; not in the very least. You can't help yourself; it is

that tiresome aunt of yours, Mrs. Kingson. I know all about it. She just hates me, and all because I give her as good as she gives me; and she is not nice to me, and does not speak at all nicely of you, Molly, darling, though she does flatter and fawn so to your face!"

"My aunt, Mrs. Kingson, has nothing to do with it. But, Flora, you can quite understand that a perpetual third is not always a joy, especially to a man. You have been a great many weeks here, and surely you have home duties."

"No, I have not; besides, I do think it very cruel of you to put an end to all chance of my making a very good marriage. Mamma will be so angry with me."

"Do you really expect Mr. Wyncote to propose to you, Flora?"

"He ought to, and he would do it to-morrow if he thought you wished it. Will you not say one word for me?"

"I never heard such nonsense," exclaimed Mrs. Burlington. "How can I tell him anything of the kind? What third person can interfere? No, Flora, you deceive yourself. If Mr. Wyncote wanted to propose to you, he has had endless opportunities of doing so. I am afraid that his being in love with you is a delusion. I must speak plainly; and if you go, and he cares for you, he will follow you."

Flora's face was a study. She was pale with rage, and so furious that she could hardly speak. She sprang to her feet, and confronted her hostess. "You," she said—"you, of all women, to talk of a third person not interfering! How was your marriage made up? Do you suppose that it would ever have come about if Mrs. Kingson had not managed it? She says so herself. I have heard her say so ever so often in this house. You are the last person to speak in that way. Your husband did not care; he was not the least in love with you; only Mrs. Kingson got him to propose to you."

She threw herself down again, and cried with sheer passion, frightened now at what she had said. Mrs. Burlington never looked at her, never spoke. She seemed turned to stone.

At length she moved slowly to the door, and passed on to go to her own room. Flora rushed after her in an agony of fear and shame, and even remorse. "Molly! Molly! forgive me," she sobbed; "what shall I do if you turn round upon me! I wish my tongue had been cut out. I wish—I wish—Molly!"

"The words you have said are not words to forgive," said Mrs. Burlington. "I will only ask you one question: Is there—was there—any truth in what you said about my aunt—any truth in your having heard her say—those things?"

"Every word was true. How could I have invented it? Yes, I have over and over again heard her say when you did things she did not like, that but for her you would never have been here—that you owed her everything!"

Mrs. Burlington turned quickly, before Flora could stop her, and went into her own room, leaving Flora Harrington more thoroughly unhappy than she had ever been in her life. She was in her way as great a coward as Mrs. Kingson. When she thought of the wrath of that lady when Maria spoke to her, and remembered the white fixed look on the face of her hostess and quondam friend, she felt that the best thing she could do was to go away as fast as ever she could.

She went to her room, asked the maid who attended to her to pack her things, and, putting on her hat, slipped out of the house, trusting to have a final interview with Mr. Wyncote and to bring about what she hoped for. She walked much faster than usual before she met the object of her hopes; and when she met him she might have read in his face, as she might have read before, that he was absolutely indifferent to her; more—that he actually disliked her. But Flora was so full of her own ideas, her own hopes, that she did not see.

She held out her hand, and gazed tearfully at him, presenting anything but a prepossessing picture to the eyes of the young man.

"This is good-bye," she said, with a little sob and still gazing at him sentimentally.

"Indeed! Are you going away? It is sudden, is it not?"

"It is very sudden."

"I hope you have not had bad news?"

"I have had no news at all."

"Then why . . . ?"

"Why am I going? Oh, I am so—so unhappy, Mr. Wyncote!" and her sobs became more audible.

He looked at her awkwardly. He did feel sympathetic, and this scene was not to his taste.

"Since my presence distresses you I will go on," he said, raising his hat, really anxious to get away.

"Oh," sobbed Flora; "it is not your presence; it is because . . . because . . . I am leaving you that I am unhappy!"

"It is really very good of you to mind," he said, very coldly; "since I have done nothing to deserve it."

"You are so cruel . . . You knew I cared . . . You must have known . . ."

She sobbed still more, and put her handkerchief to her eyes. When she withdrew it he had gone!

Flora's rage and indignation knew no bounds. She vowed vengeance upon him, upon Mrs. Burlington, and Mrs. Kingson. The excitement of her passion kept her up; she hurried back to the house, wrote a note to Maria, and went on foot to the station, where she sent a fly for her luggage, and only when she was in the train whirling up to London did she realise that she had lost her friend, and a luxurious place to stay at, and that all her hopes and ambitious aspirations were levelled by her own mischievous folly.

Then she repented bitterly—not the seed she had sown, the mischief she had made, but the loss of what she could not replace. Never again would that luxurious ease be hers; never again would she be

able to stay for many, many weeks in so delightful a place; never again would she have a chance of meeting the sort of man she desired to marry.

"What a fool I was!" she said aloud, gazing at the unlovely surroundings of her suburban dwelling.

Her mother met her with much more surprise than pleasure in her face.

"What has brought you home?" she asked. She knew Flora well—only too well.

Flora laughed shortly. "One cannot live for all time at a friend's house."

Her mother said nothing for a full minute. Then her anxiety showed itself. "Are you engaged, Flora?"

"No," said Flora, shortly; "and if I stayed till I was grey and old it was not likely. When the lady of the house is young and good-looking, and monopolizes every man in sight, what chance has any girl?"

"That was it, was it?"

"That was it."

"Oh, those young married women have much to answer for!" said the aggrieved mother.

"I think they have," said Flora. "Let me have tea, mother; and, please, don't let papa ask any questions."

And Mrs. Harrington rang for tea, and sympathised very much with her daughter; and Mr. Harrington asked no questions, for which Flora was duly thankful. It was very difficult to put things as she liked to put them to Mr. Harrington. He had a knack of extracting so many contradictions. As the days went on, Flora had a faint hope (which grew fainter each day) that Mrs. Burlington would write and give her an opening. She could not believe that she had, by her own act and deed, shut the doors of what appeared a paradise to her. As time went on she realised still more how easy it is, in one moment of folly, to do what never can be put right again. Unfortunately for herself, she did not read the lesson right. It taught her nothing.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLACKNESS OF DESPAIR.

MRS. BURLINGTON left Flora, and went to her own room. She locked herself in, and lay face downwards on the sofa, feeling as if her head was on fire, bewildered, and too deeply stirred to find relief in tears. Her whole world appeared to have suddenly crumbled beneath her feet. She had vague misgivings; she had been conscious of some mystery—that remained a mystery still—that her husband had been persuaded to marry her, that he had needed persuasion, and that her aunt had openly boasted of having managed it all.

All her life she had been made much of, petted, flattered, and been allowed to suppose herself as one superior to her surroundings, and in marrying Mr. Burlington, as we know, she had been pleased by the great surprise manifested, and which she read in only one way; and that way favourably to herself.

Never had she had to suffer any disappointment. Her aunt was always smooth and essentially a person who took a certain proverb to heart about the easiest way of gliding over the surface of life. She flattered everybody—even herself. Her friends cited her as one of the charming women who never said an unkind word of anyone; her enemies—and she had some—talked of her as slippery and smooth and false. But a woman who is slippery and smooth is not always false, a great deal of her smoothness was from want of depth. She was never sufficiently interested in anyone or in any subject under the sun to get indignant about any asper-

sions. She hated friction; like Flora she detested it as she did cold and wet and other disagreeable things.

Mrs. Burlington knew that a peevish denial was all she would have, and she resolved to keep out of the way till Mr. Kingson's arrival. From him she would learn what it all meant. In her misery, she missed her husband in a way that surprised her. He was so reliable and so absolutely true. What had been told him? Had he been lulled into acquiescence as she had been? Alas! If he had been deceived as she evidently had been deceived, what hope was there for them in the future—that looked so dreary a length to her at that moment.

When the carriage returned with Mr. Kingson seated by his wife, Maria went to the door of the big drawing-room to receive him. She was deadly pale, and he was struck with consternation at her appearance; there was also something in her manner which made Mrs. Kingson excessively uncomfortable.

She tried to make signs to her husband that she

wanted to speak to him first, but, as usual, poor man, he could not understand them, and she was baffled as she often had been before. Tea was served, and when that meal was over Maria rose.

"I wish to ask you something," she said in a low voice. "I want to speak to you, uncle, in my own sitting-room."

"Certainly, my dear; nothing wrong I hope?"

"How selfish and inconsiderate of you, my dear, to take my dear old man away when he has only just come off a long journey. Pray postpone conversation till later on. A wife has the first right to her husband."

Maria did not answer her. She was looking at Mr. Kingson, and he could not ignore the appeal in her eyes. Something was wrong. What in the world had happened?

Maria led the way to her sitting-room, made so charming by the good taste and lavish expenditure devoted to it. The scent of the lilies-of-the-valley

and other flowers, that sparkling wood fire, that look of perfect comfort, all seemed far apart from any tragedy; and yet there was something tragic in the way Mrs. Burlington stood facing her uncle, waiting to hear what would change her careless, happy *insouciance* for a feeling akin to despair.

Mrs. Kingson, trying to hide her nervousness and anxiety under a pettish assumption of being ill-used, said blandly as she followed her husband into the room, "I take it for granted I may be allowed to enter. My husband has no secrets from me!"

Maria made no answer. She stood absolutely still; her face like marble, her dark eyes glowing with feverish excitement, which she repressed in her speech, which was singularly calm and emotionless.

"Uncle! I know you will tell me the truth. I wish to hear the truth! Is there any reason why I should not be told the truth?"

“What about, my dear?”

He was uneasy; he was extremely fond of his niece, and he had thought happily about her for a long time now, as safely married to a high-minded and honourable man who would make her happy all the rest of her life.

“My dearest child!” he went on, as he noted that she was in deadly earnest. “Your husband knows anything there is to know; ask him. If he thinks it right to rake up old stories, he will do so. What is the use of it?”

“Just what I say,” said Mrs. Kingson, much relieved.

“Oh!” exclaimed Maria, in a low thrilling voice, “are you also going to be against me, and I counted upon you! Why should I be treated in this way? I am allowed to feel that there is some disgraceful mystery in my life, and I am not to know what it is!”

“I never said a single word to lead you to

suppose such a thing," exclaimed Mrs. Kingson. "My sweetest child, really your imagination is so extraordinary" said Mrs. Kingson.

Maria raised her hand with a gesture of impatience. "Aunt Kingson, you have said too much and too little! You told Flora Harrington, you boasted openly, that but for you my husband would never have married me! Why? You must have deceived me as you deceived him, probably. What is there about me different from other girls who are wooed and won? Why should I be grateful for being on a footing with other people? I want to know, and I appeal to you, my uncle, who have been as a kind and dear father to me, to tell me everything!"

Poor Mr. Kingson, who was a warm-hearted man, was greatly moved by this appeal. But it was exactly what he had always foreseen. He had always told his wife that a day might come when Maria would not be satisfied to be left in ignorance.

And his wife had always answered his objections by giving the plausible reasons that it would make her unhappy, and, if she married, her husband was the proper person, etc.

Now he regretted it.

“What you say has great truth in it, Maria. I think you should know all there is to tell. What do you wish to know in the first place?”

“I wish to know the truth—the exact truth—about my marriage. How was it, uncle? Mrs. Kingson told me I was admired, and that if he was a marrying man I was the one object of Mr. Burlington’s wishes. Now I hear of persuasion. It hurts me; I want to know what it means, and why my marriage had to be “arranged” and “managed,” and why it was so difficult a matter that I ought to be deeply indebted to her; had it not been for her tact—her management—it never would have been.”

She spoke still in the calm and quiet tone which

had so struck her uncle all along, but her breath came and went quickly, and her wonderful eyes were still full of the strange far-away look and subdued fire which spoke of the deep and passionate excitement under which she was labouring.

"I know very little what led to Mr. Burlington's proposal in the first instance," said Mr. Kingson, anxious to speak the exact truth, and to speak it so as to wound her as little as possible. "Afterwards——"

"Afterwards?" repeated Maria, breathlessly.

"As an honourable man, I could not let him marry you in ignorance of certain things. I can assure you, my dear child, I told him with much hesitation—I was afraid of what might be the consequences! He relieved me very much, for, after thinking it all over very earnestly, he turned to me, and I always remember the exact words he used."

"Tell me!" came almost as a cry from Mrs. Burlington's white lips.

"He said: 'Poor thing! Poor child! It shall make no difference. She had better not know, as she has never been told.' It relieved me very much. Some men might, you know, have drawn back. But your husband is one in a thousand, my dear."

There was a dead silence, only broken by the short, quick breath from Mrs. Burlington's agitated frame. "And now tell me why?" she said, holding a little more tightly to the marble figure which stood in bold relief on one side of the chimney-piece. "What is it?"

"You are my niece, my dear. My poor brother was a very dear fellow and good-looking. He was so great a favourite everywhere; he had so many gifts. He got into some sad scrapes, and for a time we all lost sight of him. Then I was sent for. He was in Paris. You were with him... He was dying of a wound... He had fought a

duel, and had been shot. It was about his wife, and I confess if I had been he, I should hardly have thought her worth fighting for . . . But there, my dear, forgive me. Of course, you cannot feel as I do. She was your mother."

"Who was my mother?"

"A dancer, my dear; an English or Irish girl. I do not know her real name, but my poor brother adored her. Then that wretched Mr. Wyncote came upon the scene, and my brother found out things, and challenged him. The worst feature of the whole thing, I think, was that when my poor brother was carried to his home she had left it. She went off with Wyncote, and left you and her dying husband to fate. Heartless!"

"You are quite, quite sure of this?" Was it Maria speaking? The voice so hoarse, so altered.

"We had every reason to be sure. Well, now, you know everything," said Mr. Kingson, relieved at having got it over; "and you see, my dear, that

it must have been a shock to Mr. Burlington. It was particularly unfortunate that the scoundrel who killed my brother and worked all that mischief should have been a Wyncote, because, though you probably never saw them—they would naturally keep away from you!—they are very near neighbours, and, unfortunately, a good many people knew the story for that reason. A bad lot, a bad lot!”

“My mother! Is she living, or—did she die?”

“Oh, died long ago, I believe;” said Mr. Kingson; “of course if she had been alive we should have heard something of her.”

Mrs. Kingson put up her handkerchief to screen her face, also to hide a peculiar expression that flitted over it. There was an inarticulate cry from Maria—a cry as if an animal was wounded to death, and Mr. Kingson was just in time to catch her, as the whole strain told upon her, and she fell back insensible.

CHAPTER XIV.

ONE LETTER WHICH DID NOT REACH ITS DESTINATION.

WHEN Mrs. Burlington lay unconscious before her uncle and aunt, Mrs. Kingson was at the moment too anxious to triumph, otherwise "I told you so," or words to that effect would have aggravated the position to poor Mr. Kingson. He had small experience of fainting fits, and this prolonged insensibility looked like death. When after moments that seemed hours to him his niece came to herself, she stretched out her hand to him, and thanked him in a tone that went to his heart.

Then she prayed to be left alone. She would go

to her bedroom and keep quiet. She wanted to be alone. She shrank from Mrs. Kingson's caressing hand as if it hurt her; and then, making an effort on seeing that this vexed her, she said gently, "Forgive me! you have acted as you thought right. You cannot help thinking in this way. You have often shown me kindness."

Mrs. Kingson shed tears, and with some difficulty Mrs. Burlington was left to face it all in solitude. Her brain seemed ready to burst; all her pulses were tingling. To a high-spirited and proud woman death would have been far, far preferable to life with this knowledge.

The cruelty of allowing her to grow up in unconsciousness—of letting her imagine that she was on a footing with other girls, while she was the child of a disgraced mother, the child of a dancer of disreputable character—seemed so great to her!

Then, through all the bitterest reflections a woman could know, came the remembrance of her husband's

infinite patience and his generosity. How often, though all unconsciously, she must have wounded him! That hateful dance! No wonder he tried to prevent her from recalling her story to everyone. But who knew her story? How was it? The Duchess, did she know it? And was that why her husband had talked of gratitude; and the Beryls, and Marcia Dorington?

The poor thing lay crushed with her misery and sorrow, and yet thinking more of her husband and the consequences to him than even of herself. Tears came thick and fast as she recalled scenes in which she must have appeared to him so infinitely ridiculous, and yet he had borne with her and made no sign.

What was there left to her; how could she repair the wrong she had all unwittingly done him? Only one thing seemed possible to her now; to obliterate all remembrance of herself, to go away, and blot out from his life all memory of herself and her history.

She could not free him, but she could make the tie between them as if it did not exist.

Did Aunt Anne know her story? She thought of the self-assertion, the airs of superiority, all the vain girlish follies she had been guilty of, and she shrank piteously from the recollection of the ridiculous light she must have shown herself in. Her husband would be away for some two or three days; during that time she would think—she felt she could think no more now—and she would make some plan.

When her maid came to offer her tea, she found her so feverish and so excited that she was quite disturbed about her; but everything she suggested in the way of a remedy was refused, and Mrs. Burlington was left again to the one thing she craved for—solitude. In the meantime Mr. Kingson and his wife had a passage at arms that was considerably more serious than usual.

“Having kept Maria in ignorance of her story all these years against my advice, why in the world

could you not hold your tongue about your 'persuasion' and your 'management' now? You might have known that with a high-spirited, quick-tempered girl like poor Maria, there would be the very devil to pay if it came out."

"I think you are swearing," answered Mrs. Kingson, in a shocked voice, trying to carry the war into the enemy's country, and failing signally.

Mr. Kingson, as a rule, allowed his wife to arrange all minor matters, but she knew by experience that in certain things she had to submit to his ruling. There was always, to speak the truth, something Mrs. Kingson kept him in ignorance of—her passion for keeping things smooth being only equalled by her passion for carrying some favourite point whenever that point appeared a little difficult to carry. She intrigued about everything. If she made a new purchase, it was conveyed in secrecy to her house, and she would take her own time for announcing it, her time generally

being when it was certain of being discovered in some other way. Her idea of mankind was a little peculiar. All men, according to her, required to be "managed," and the happiest married couple (like herself and her husband, for instance) was where a woman was clever and capable, and did manage. She prided herself upon having few matrimonial jars, and often pointed out with some pride to her husband how well they got on.

The whole history of the silence maintained toward poor Maria was that Mrs. Kingson had taken up a particular position, and, having taken it up, insisted on maintaining it.

The child was extremely pretty, very graceful, and very winning. "I will be her mother," said Mrs. Kingson, "on one condition, that we bury the fact. If she is to be told, it will destroy all her brightness, and take one of her great charms away; and if this is to be the case, send her elsewhere. If you follow my wishes, I charge myself

with her future." She said this so very impressively that though her husband disagreed with her, he was for a time unable to argue with her. Then when he did so, "Why blight her youth?" she had asked; "let her be happy now. She may never be so happy again?"

Each time the idea was mooted that Maria ought to know, each time she had an excellent reason for postponing the revelation. Then when Maria married she had had her triumph, and she had, perhaps, triumphed unduly. Now, when Mr. Kingson found how hardly it had gone with the poor girl, he repented bitterly that she had been brought up in ignorance. But repentance could amend nothing now.

He felt now that Mr. Burlington ought to know what had happened, and that he should not come back to find his wife ill, Flora Harrington gone and the situation changed. So he sat down to enlighten him and to tell his story in his own straightforward fashion. He was not a very fluent

writer, and he had that to say which was naturally delicate and difficult to say. He got as far as to tell the truth about his wife's unguarded statements, and Maria's fainting fit, when Mrs. Kingson came into the room.

"Writing, dearest? I hoped you were resting after such a journey, and so trying a scene. I hoped you really would think a little of yourself, and take a rest."

"The journey was nothing, and I find it impossible to rest when I have something on my mind."

"Poor dear! I cannot imagine what you can have upon your mind now."

"I have a disagreeable thing to do. I must write and tell Burlington that his wife is ill, and how it was that I was obliged to speak out and tell her everything. I will say as little about you as I can help."

"Thank you, dear. Why mention me at all?"

"Because I cannot tell the truth without telling the whole truth."

"But Flora Harrington is the truth. She first stirred up all the mud."

"She could have stirred up nothing if she had not known through you that there was mud," he answered coldly.

She was excessively annoyed. She did so hate disturbances and rows, and everything that troubled the calm she loved.

She tried to argue, and to convince. Mr. Kingson allowed her to argue, but would not be convinced; and even his wife at last came to the conclusion that further argument was useless.

But Mrs. Kingson was a woman who never accepted a defeat. She went hastily to her own room, and she there and then penned a letter to Mr. Burlington, telling him her own version of the whole affair; and, having addressed it, she slipped it into her pocket, and returned to the library.

It may be noted that she did not sign her name in full, but put a sort of hieroglyphic at the end

of her letter that might answer for any initial.

Mr. Kingson was not in the library when she returned, and the letter was lying unfolded as yet, but complete upon the blotting book. She glanced quickly at the contents, and flushed with anger and annoyance, when she saw the apology made for her great indiscretion in her husband's straightforward fashion.

Mr. Kingson had little idea of the burning indignation that lay under his wife's calm demeanour when he returned. He had been to see his niece, and in telling her he was writing to her husband, he asked what he could say from her; and she had produced a sheet of paper, scribbled all over to him in pencil, and begged him to enclose it to him. Mr. Kingson had charged himself with this, and returned to his place.

He added a postscript to his letter to the effect that Maria was quieter, and he hoped much better, and he sealed the two up, dropping the document

himself into the postbox. Having done the thing he thought justly enough was one of the most disagreeable tasks he had ever had to do, since there was a distinct reflection upon his wife in the narration, he did take the rest he was really in want of—lying back in a most luxurious Howard's chair and gave loud assurance to his wife of his resting and repose.

To rise noiselessly, substitute one letter for another, and return to her place was the work of a moment, and with his letter in her pocket she heard with intense satisfaction the ponderous steps of Marsham in the hall, the opening of the letter-box, and then his departure.

All was safe; and poor Maria's pathetic, agonised appeal to her husband to know his wishes, and what she could do to put things right for him—in which her gratitude, her admiration, and, all unconsciously to herself, her love for him were openly to be seen—lay in the soft lining of Mrs. Kingson's pocket!

CHAPTER XV.

SUSPENSE AND NO ANSWER !

MRS. BURLINGTON was really too ill and feverish to rise, and she lay in her darkened room suffering intensely. She followed in thought the incoherent lines she had scribbled to her husband, and tried to imagine what he would think of everything. She knew that he would be sorry for her—that his first thoughts about her would be kind and generous. She could see his kind eyes softening, and almost hear the murmur, "Poor thing!" coming from his lips. It would explain so much to him.

And in the future, as he had always known this

and had forgiven it, this terrible revelation would change her from all he had had to excuse and even forgive to a wife he should find devoted, affectionate, caring for what pleased him, and him only. Ah, what a future she would give him; how she would try to make amends!

The hours moved on slowly, as they always do when fraught with important expectations, and Mrs. Burlington had time to hope and think, and think and hope again, before any sign was sent from her husband. Then it arrived from him to Mr. Kingson.

"Thanks for letter; home to-morrow early; regret illness." A telegram only!

Not another word; no answer to the agonising appeal she had sent him; not a message to her—nothing!

She read and re-read the flimsy pink paper as if to extract some forgotten word, and, with a feeling of despair, she lay down and closed her eyes. She felt as if all was over. Her cry had been unheeded,

and her husband must have known what it had cost her. Not till now had she realised what her offer had involved. She had proposed going away, and his silence, his cruel silence, seemed to say—"Go!" She had entreated for a word; he sent her no word... Then, as the time rushed on, she felt as if she must acquiesce in his decision! She must go and remove herself from the home she had valued so little—from the presence of the husband she had injured all innocently; she must not continue to be a drawback to his career. Alas! how she had already spoiled it for him!

She had some money, and she could not go out into the world penniless. Whatever happened, however, she would not keep his name openly; she would see no shadow rested upon it. She would leave his house as befitted his wife, and leave no room for any scandal or surmises on the part of the servants. Afterwards the explanations might be given as he pleased.

She drove to the station, calling at the bank and changing a large cheque; and as Mr. Burlington was arriving on one platform, his wife, with a thick veil over her face, was gliding away to an unknown future from another.

She did not give way to tears, being seldom relieved in that way. Her heart seemed to have stood still. She was conscious of a weight of great pain, and she felt ill and dizzy—hardly conscious, indeed, of where she was. She never moved; she saw figures coming in and getting out, and, at last, only one person—a man—was left sitting in an opposite corner.

She lifted her veil once to get more air; she felt as if she was suffocating. She heard an exclamation, and raised her eyes in heavy surprise, turning her head involuntarily towards her fellow-passenger. It was Horace Wyncote. No one could be more unwelcome, for the simple reason that she was afraid of his betraying her whereabouts, and

she wanted to get away to hide from everyone who knew her.

The probable conclusions that his having travelled with her might create, never for one moment occurred to her.

He was terribly shocked by her pallor and by the set, rigid look in her features. He was a gentleman, and he did not know what to say to her, whether she would resent his intruding upon her thoughts, evidently very painful thoughts, and, yet, offers of help he must give.

"I trust you will allow me to be of some use to you as we are fellow travellers, unless—is Mr. Burlington in a smoking carriage?" he said, in a very respectful way.

"I am alone. No one can be of use."

"You look so ill!"

"I am ill. Yes; something you can do. Will you not say we met; that you saw me? I wish no one to know."

She spoke in the suppressed, quiet tone of one suffering, and anxious not to betray suffering.

"Do you wish this? Your wishes naturally outweigh everything else—but you are ill."

"I do wish it."

Then it occurred to her that she might say a word to him about Flora.

Flora had behaved ill to her, but if she could say or do anything to make her happy she would do it. There was also another thing she would ask him somehow. Did he know her story? or her mother's? She was so confused that she did not see at the moment what this Mr. Wyncote had to do with that terrible story. All seemed bewilderment to her; and even speech seemed very difficult, and her words dropped slowly from her fevered lips.

"Do you know that Flora Harrington has gone?"

"Yes; I know it."

"Mr. Wyncote, it is difficult to say what I want

to say . . . but are you grieved? Is her going a matter of great regret to you?" Mr. Wyncote looked surprised.

Then he reddened, and said, in a low voice, "No one can well be regretted as long as the principal person is left. I am very sorry you are going, though I hope not for a very long time."

She never took in his meaning, and he saw this, and was curiously hurt and annoyed. "May I ask you what has puzzled me a great deal?" he said in a low, very earnest tone.

"About Flora? Yes."

"Partly about her. It has puzzled me very often to get kind messages, even flowers, from you, Mrs. Burlington, and yet when we meet . . . you keep me at arm's length, and grant me barely friendly, cold civility. You have sent me messages?"

"Never."

"Nor flowers—violets?"

"Never. Why should I?" and Mrs. Burlington's

unfeigned astonishment spoke very forcibly to the young man, and mortified him much.

She was too dazed and bewildered to follow the subject, and after a pause she said: "Everything appears strange and new to me, and I am not well. Does your father like your coming over to see us, or . . . does he object?" She fixed her glowing eyes on him, and he was obliged to be honest.

"My father objects; some old quarrel. I never knew what his reason is."

"Mr. Wyncote, you did wrong to act against your father's wishes. My husband also objected to your coming. I did not understand. Now I know, and he is right. But I thought Flora and you . . ."

In the face of her absolute unconsciousness Mr. Wyncote felt ashamed of having ever dreamed that she took the faintest interest in him. He felt a little murderous against Flora, who had said so much, and who had probably been laughing in her sleeve the whole time. Even his vanity had never

enabled him to reconcile Mrs. Burlington's kind and constant presents of violets, etc., and still kinder messages with her absolute indifference when they met. Now all was explained. He must think for her, and act for the best. Their train never stopped till they got to London. When they arrived there he put her in a cab, and asked for directions. She shook her head, and told the man to drive on. Mr. Wyncote immediately chartered another cab, and followed her.

For her own good he must know where she went. For her own sake he would then go straight home, and let her husband know where she was. He had promised nothing.

Her cab drove on through all the dull and uninviting streets lying beyond Euston-road, reached at last Kensington, and stopped at a small semi-detached villa near Campden Hill. Then, quickly taking the number, he retraced his steps to the station, and, getting a hurried meal at a restaurant,

took the night express home. When Mr. Burlington reached home his first question was for Maria and how she was. Mrs. Kingson was glad to answer the question in a reassuring manner.

"Maria is better and has gone out driving. I offered to go with her, but she wished to be alone."

Mr. Burlington said one word to Mr. Kingson in answer to his question, put a little anxiously, "Well, you got my letter?"

"Yes; we have been wrong throughout. She ought to have been told!"

"I have long thought that. However, it is a great thing over!" And poor Mr. Kingson gave a deep sigh of relief.

"Mr. Burlington, who was in a fever of impatience to see his wife and reassure her, went to the library and paced up and down in great and natural impatience.

Finally he rang. "Mrs. Burlington has not come in yet?"

"No, sir."

"All right; let her know I have returned when she comes in; and bring tea here."

"Yes, sir; for everyone, sir?"

"No; for two."

Five o'clock came and tea; no Mrs. Burlington.

Mr. Burlington hurriedly took some tea, and went out to the stables. The first thing he saw was the last washing being given to his wife's victoria, and her horses were already clothed and in their stalls. This was curious, as she had not come home.

The head coachman came up to him. "Mrs. Burlington gave no orders about being met, sir. What shall I do? She caught the three o'clock train for London, and forgot to say when the carriage should meet her. As Mrs. Burlington took no luggage, some time this evening, sir, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Burlington.

"Very good, sir."

His master did not think it very good. She had

said nothing about going to London to Mrs. Kingson, and she had taken no luggage. Of course she intended to be home that evening.

When the carriage returned empty at seven o'clock, they got very uneasy. Mrs. Kingson was dreadfully uncomfortable. Mr. Kingson and Mr. Burlington went to meet a train due at nine, hoping to hear something, and to get any telegram quicker. Of course she was not there; and partly to hear whether she had appeared ill, or in what manner she had gone, Mr. Burlington said to the stationmaster: "Mrs. Burlington caught the three o'clock express?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are quite sure?"

"I am quite sure, sir, as I put her into the carriage myself. I was standing at the door when she came up, as Mr. Wyncote was giving his directions about a box, and I myself put her into the train, into that carriage. The two men said no word to each other till they reached home. Then Mr. Burlington

said hoarsely, "Do not think I draw wrong conclusions. I know it has been an accident, but it is unfortunate."

Mr. Kingson gave him that sympathetic grip of the hand which is a man's way of expressing what he cannot say, and left him. Had he been wise he would not have unburdened himself to his wife. But he did do so, and repented it immediately afterwards. She burst into tears and sobs, and was apparently inconsolable.

"History repeats itself," she exclaimed of the girl whom she professed to love and admire so much. Mr. Kingson was furious with her. He could not understand her immediately putting the worse construction on what he felt must be an accidental misfortune. She was subdued by his indignation, but to justify herself heaped reason upon reason for being led to that conclusion.

"There was the quarrel with Flora—who knows what that was about? There may have been jealousy! Poor dear Maria's bane was her love of

admiration; she never could bear any one else to be first. She always wished to be the bright particular star. You know what I mean?"

"I do not," he answered, looking at her with such an expression of indignant reproach that she was a little cowed. "You flattered her incessantly, she was your sweetest and dearest. I thought you were sincere, and though, as you know, I often blamed you for such constant and outrageous flattery, I excused it because it seemed to be the outcome of a very real affection. At the first sign of an action we do not understand, you turn upon her, and class her with all that is vile!"

"No, I don't. I only think that, being afraid of having forfeited her position here, and being led by admiration, she took the very first chance of running away."

"And is not that being vile?"

"There is no use in arguing with you—you will misunderstand my words. I only mean—"

"For God's sake leave her alone!" he exclaimed;

“the child is dear to me, and I cannot hear you in cold blood argue away her character. Mercifully, her husband shares my belief in her. He believes nothing against her!”

“It is all because of her beauty,” said Mrs. Kingson, when her husband was well out of hearing. “People ask what does a straight nose do for one in this world? I say everything! Because Maria has a straight nose and a good skin, she may do everything she likes, and every man belonging to her will believe nothing against her! And what a foolish, silly girl to give up all this luxury and comfort! I am sure when I think of these arm-chairs and the carriages and everything else, I feel inclined to shake her.”

It will be observed that Mrs. Kingson took life anything but seriously; and her indignation was directed towards that part of Maria's conduct which would probably affect herself and her future relations with the owner of Burlington Manor.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHANGE OF PLACE.

MR. BURLINGTON'S actions were governed entirely by the first and greatest wish of his heart, that no one should guess—no one in the household should imagine—that his wife had taken a step without his knowledge and consent. He sent everyone to bed—went to his own room as if he also was going there—having arranged at the railway station for a carriage to be kept in readiness so that when his wife returned (he did not say “if” even to himself) she would not have to wait for a single moment.

When the house was quiet he went down to the

library, renewed the fire, threw open the shutters, drawing back the heavy velvet curtains, and spent the night in watching the particular turn of the road near the lodge-gates where the carriage lamps would first show their glimmer in the darkness.

He reviewed the life he had lived since his marriage, and he acknowledged to himself that his wife had grown dearer to him than he had at one time ever thought possible. She might be provoking, wilful, different in many ways perhaps from the ideal he had had, but the individual charm of her manner, her brightness, and her absolute truthfulness, made her more loveable than perhaps a more perfect character would ever have been.

She considered him dull, and had often said so, half in fun half in earnest. Well, he was dull; his upbringing had been so shadowed, and the tone of everything around him had been sober.

Into this dull sobriety she had brought an inexplicable and delightful brilliancy, which he had so

much admired in her as a girl, and then tried to neutralise as being too unlike his ideas of a quiet home life. All her faults, all her follies, were forgotten. Was it wonderful that as he had not shown appreciation she should feel pleased at appreciation elsewhere? Nothing more than this, for he never for one moment imagined her capable of wrong.

Poor child! What a frightful blow the truth must have been to her! Now, when it was too late how he had blamed himself for not having taken Aunt Anne's advice.

The night wore away, over the frosty dew long shafts of pale light stole—the trees touched here and there with autumnal gold and crimson began to shake off the grey and black shades of night.

Mr. Burlington watched the dawn, wondering what the coming day might bring him. He went early to his room, where he refreshed himself by the splashing and tubbing essential to one's happiness, and he went downstairs again. He made himself

some tea, and just as the earliest housemaid, with sleepy eyes, was beginning to open shutters and windows to air the house, Mr. Burlington went out across the park.

The deer were still lying quiet, and rose hurriedly to look at him as he passed. It was very early, but action was necessary to him, and movement.

The morning was clear, cold, and sunshiny, and all the world was brightened by the brilliancy of the sun. Hope is nearer in the daylight, and the doubts and fears, the growing despondency of the last few hours, vanished with the night shadows. He was going to Aunt Anne, as yet in ignorance of everything, and he was just striking across the path leading directly to her house when he saw a figure hurrying to meet him.

He stopped still, not at first recognising him, and then with infinite surprise saw that it was Horace Wyncote.

No conventional greeting passed between them.

Mr. Wyncote was anxious to speak and Mr. Burlington to hear; but there was a necessary pause to give the young man—who had been hurrying tremendously—time to recover breath."

"I went to London yesterday, and I happened to be in the same carriage with Mrs. Burlington. Have you heard from her?"

"No."

"Ah! I was afraid she would not be able to write. I am afraid from what I saw that she is very ill. Of course, I offered to be of any use to her. I need not say all that. But she would have no help. She seemed much annoyed that I was there; she was apparently suffering from some severe shock. . . . I got a cab for her and put her in. She would not give me the address, but made the man drive on."

"Then, you do not know. . . ."

"Where she went to? I do. I thought her so ill that I followed, and I saw her get out at a house

in Campden Hill. I took the number and drove quickly away. I was so much afraid of her being still more vexed with me if she saw I had followed her." He looked very anxiously at Mr. Burlington, half afraid of hearing that he was an officious fool for his pains.

But Mr. Burlington put out his hand, and thanked him warmly. "My wife had bad news, and I was not at home to help her. I must go at once to her. You will do me a very real favour if you will come in to breakfast. Wait for me one moment, for I wish to speak to my aunt, and we will go home together."

Horace Wyncote went into the garden, took out his favourite pipe, and smoked it to stay the pangs of hunger. For the emotions keep hunger off for a time, but only for a time, and a night journey and keen morning air had considerably sharpened his healthy appetite.

Mr. Burlington was not very long absent. Ru-

mours had reached Aunt Anne too late at night to enable her to communicate with Cyril, but had prepared her for his visit. They took hurried counsel together, and then the two men brushed the heavy dew of the long grass in the park as they strode homewards.

Breakfast was ordered to be hastened, a room given to Mr. Wyncoate, and in the meantime Mr. Burlington made his plans. He of course would go to London, and he would take some of his wife's things. Till he found her, no one should know more than that bad news had hurried her away, and that he was following her. Mrs. Kingson's countenance was a very real study when she came into the breakfast-room. She had heard that a strange gentleman was there, and her swift and active imagination had run from a family lawyer to a detective belonging to the Divorce Court.

When she entered, her features composed to an expression of resigned grief and condolence, she

beheld the man she had credited with being the hero of a frightful scandal in high life prosaically stirring his tea and being carefully attended to by the "injured" husband. Her start of surprise, her countenance, and her air, all spoke forcibly to Mr. Burlington; and he reflected with some bitterness on the part she had played from beginning to end. He spoke very little to her, however. As soon as breakfast was over, he asked Mr. Kingson to join them in the library, and then laid his plans before him.

"May I ask one question?" said Horace Wyncote. "I want a single word of explanation. What connection is supposed to have existed between my uncle and Mrs. Kingson, the lady who was known professionally as 'Donella?' What part is he supposed to have played in her life?"

"Is it possible," exclaimed Mr. Kingson, "that you are in ignorance of that story? My unhappy brother died, and dying told me the story when

he . . . She left her home, her husband, and her child, and fled with him."

"I do not believe it," said young Mr. Wyncote.

"Have you any proofs?"

"My brother had proofs; he thought, at any rate, he had proofs."

"It seems a strange thing. My uncle became a missionary; he went abroad, and the lady . . .

"The lady, Donella, what of her?" and Mr. Burlington's voice was full of suppressed anger. The whole subject was so terribly painful to him.

"She was in a convent not many years ago, and I do not think you know the rights of the story," said the young man, in a very odd tone. "I wonder whether this is why"

Cyril Burlington laid his hand on his shoulder. "Say whatever has to be said, but, for God's sake, speak out. Concealment and mystery lead to nothing but misery."

"I was going to say that I wondered why my

father so strongly objected to my coming here. No one dares mention the name of Kingson before him. But I know nothing."

"I have told you all I know," said Mr. Kingson curtly—"all I believe to be the truth."

"All this has nothing to do with our present plans," said Mr. Burlington, impatiently. "I am going to shut up the house for the present, and I am going to London, till she comes home with me; but I will write all details. I have ordered a carriage to take you to the station. Say what you feel right to your wife."

"Stay," said Mr. Kingson. "What can I do? Can I not help you in any way? At any rate, you will write. I am not less anxious than you are."

"I will write," said Cyril, and with a silent grip of the hand the three men parted.

To Marsham Mr. Burlington gave the explanation he wished given to the other servants—"Mrs. Burlington had bad news yesterday. I am following her. See that everything goes right till we return."

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Burlington's maid wished to know whether she was wanted to follow her also?"

Here was another difficulty.

"If I might venture, sir, she might have a holiday to see her friends. It was spoken of; and a telegram would fetch her at short notice if Mrs. Burlington wished her to join her."

"I believe that would be the best thing, Marsham. Now it is time for me to be off." And, taking Mrs. Burlington's luggage with him, her husband travelled up to London, his thoughts occupied about the coming meeting, now that no secret lay between his wife and himself.

The drive to Kensington seemed very long, but it ended disastrously for him.

He went to the address given him by Horace Wyncote, and, with a beating heart, rang and knocked vigorously.

The door was soon opened, and an elderly woman confronted him.

"I believe my wife arrived here yesterday," he said, going into the narrow entrance hall.

"Was it your wife? A lady came here. She expected to find Mrs. Brunton, a lady once governess to her, I think. Mrs. Brunton died a little while ago, and we have the rooms. They are all full."

"Then where did Mrs. Burlington go? Did you direct her anywhere?"

"We are strangers to this neighbourhood, and I could not recommend a stranger I knew nothing about anywhere, even if I had known the neighbourhood; besides...."

"Besides? What were you going to add?" Poor Cyril Burlington was almost beside himself with anxiety.

"The lady looked so ill, she would not be a very profitable or pleasant inmate. One of the hospitals would have been better for her," said the old woman.

Cyril turned, and went down the few steps to

the cab. The old woman called after him in an injured tone :

“As you’re her husband—if you are her husband—she will of course write to you.”

“And if she is too ill to write?” he answered slowly.

But the door was shut, and he stood quite irresolute, not knowing what upon earth to do next.

What was the reason of her having gone from him in this way? She had asked him nothing. She knew, she must know, that what was a painful revelation to her had been all along known to him—that he had nothing to learn—he had nothing to forgive her.

He hunted the neighbourhood for a furnished house, and he telegraphed to Aunt Anne when he had found one. He was sure she was in the neighbourhood, since, if she was ill, she could not have gone far; and the thought of her ill, badly nursed, and badly looked after was terrible to him.

He felt terribly helpless, and felt thankful when Mr. Kingson, full of hope and full of suggestions, came in answer to an appeal. His suggestions were practical. "If she is ill, and I have no doubt of that, a medical man must have been called in. We will take down the names and addresses, and visit them in turn. I that fails——"

"If that fails——" asked the anxious husband.

"We will get a detective," answered Mr. Kingson.

CHAPTER XVII.

“ I CANNOT SEE HIM ! ”

AS most people are aware, there is no place like London for being lost sight of—no place where obliteration can be as complete. In Paris the close registration of every new resident, and the information about their previous domiciles, their occupations, and all else, make it comparatively easy to trace any individual. But in London every clue is much more difficult to follow; liberty of the subject prevents questionings (that may be convenient) on the part of any authorities, unless there is some strong reason for following such a course.

It may be said at once that Mrs. Burlington had no idea of hiding. She had received a shock which had uprooted all her ideas, and the first impulse had been to write to her husband, whose generosity she knew so well. But the effect of his unexpected silence had been terrible to her. She took into her head that the revelation made to her gave him a chance for freedom from her follies, her mistakes, and the blunders she had made in all ignorance, and which had acted so disastrously upon his political aspirations.

To go away somewhere, where he need not trouble to follow her! She would give him his chance! She could not remain to hear Mrs. Kingson discuss the question of her birth, to be an object of pity to the servants, and an object of scorn to the various neighbours. Her brain was in a whirl; she was in so great a fever that each sound was a pain to her; and every rolling carriage seemed to be people conspiring and whispering things to her detriment.

She wondered vaguely what she had done, and why her husband had not answered her appeal. When she found her old governess dead, she went to a small hotel, and got the woman of the house to recommend rooms to her, being told to be sure to pay in advance.

Worn out by sleep and excitement, she crept into bed vaguely asking herself where her maid was, and how she came to be where she was. The house was empty at that time, and the landlady was not overworked, and had time to look after her. Recognizing how ill her lodger was, she sent for the nearest doctor, who immediately got a professional nurse; and before she had been forty-eight hours away from her home she was delirious and in all the terrible complications of brain fever.

She was only by one street separated from her husband and Aunt Anne, but to all intents and purposes many weary miles might as well have kept them apart.

In the whole painful state of suspense in which Cyril Burlington lived, one thought more terrible to him than any other stood out prominent. How had he failed so much towards his wife, as to let her think that to go away was right? Without a line to him, without an appeal, without one word!

Had he been so hard to her? He had in the outset of their married life been amused by her transparent society; he had been amazed himself to find how invariably he criticised her, and had blamed himself for this capability as being contrary to his sense of right. But for many months her open temper, her sunny bright ways, had endeared her to him. They had been happier each day. He had come to look forward to finding her at home expecting him, and to be disappointed if by chance she was not there. He had grown proud of her great beauty, and the admiration given ungrudgingly by every one.

Even regarding Flora he had been lenient, though

he had always wondered what her attraction was in the eyes of Maria. Looking back through the halo of regret, he hardly remembered those moments of provocation or any of his wife's offences; and he was very miserable. It takes a very small amount of virtue to be turned into a saint when there is much remorseful regret to help on the process! Each day, assisted by his aunt, he went steadily through the list of medical men, and called upon each in turn.

Every one spoken to upon the subject advised an advertisement. But Cyril shrank from a corner in the "agony column." There seemed to him a painful publicity in such a step. All his friends would guess to whom the paragraph alluded, and the one thing he felt he could do for her at present was to keep the story quiet, so that when he had found his wife she could slip quietly into her place again without comment, as if she had never left it. It was, perhaps, an inspiration of Aunt Anne, but

it was due to her, that poor Maria's whereabouts was found when hope had almost gone from her and from Cyril Burlington. Having interviewed doctors without end without any result, Aunt Anne was wandering down the wide road on which the villa they had taken was built, and which had small gardens and lime trees planted all along.

At present the lime trees had to be taken on trust, but the gardens were pretty in their infinitesimal way, and Aunt Anne, however occupied in other directions, was one of those women whose love of flowers was a passion. It was a grief to her that mice had several times destroyed some seeds which she had sown because the situation suited them, and that next spring they might do their good work in the world and cheer someone else. She went to the chemist to consult him about baffling the mice, when a tired-looking girl came hurriedly in with a prescription. "Mrs. Stobbs wants it at once, please. I'm to wait and bring it

back; you won't be long?" The master handed the prescription to his assistant, and said to the girl, "It will take about three minutes."

He looked round again, apologizing to Aunt Anne for having left her.

"Please do not mind; illness must always be the first consideration," she said, in her gentle voice: "someone is very ill, I suppose?"

"Very ill, indeed, if I may judge from the number of things they are trying," said the master, hastily giving a look at his assistant's arrangements.

"Is it a case where help is wanted?" and the little lady took up her purse.

"Oh, no, ma'am! I believe not. She seems, by all accounts, to have been taken ill on her way somewhere, and was so ill she could not give her name. But Mrs. Stobbs said that she had plenty of money."

"She must be awfully rich," said the girl, "she's

the beautifullest rings, and real lace on her things. Everything as fine as fine!"

Aunt Anne's heart beat quickly; ill—a stranger, and richly clad.

"What is the matter with her?" she asked quickly.

"It's her pore head that's bad; she do talk the awfullest nonsense."

"Brain fever," said the chemist, shaking his head.

"She sounds it sounds like a friend I have been looking everywhere for," said Aunt Anne, breathlessly. "Might I see her?"

"I'm sure, ma'am, Mrs. Stobbs will be glad; she's been wonderin' and wonderin' her friends weren't askin' for her. I'll show you the way; it's just a step."

"It may not be the lady I am trying to find," said Aunt Anne, "but everything sounds hopeful."

She was trembling with agitation, and could barely keep up with the girl, whose usually lag-gard steps went swiftly now, urged by the anxiety

to astonish Mrs. Stobbs and to bring the lady's friends to her knowledge.

Aunt Anne hoped and feared, and regretted she had not asked more distinctly upon what day this lady had arrived ill.

But the girl was too far ahead for her to put any questions, and in another moment she was at the door of Mrs. Stobb's lodgings. Mrs. Stobbs was a broken-down, pale woman—one of the many women unable to cope with that rougher side the world turns to those who cannot stand its buffetings. She had been a lady's maid, and had at once recognised Maria's position in the world where she had lived in much comfort till her marriage.

She was immensely relieved when she took Miss Burlington upstairs to find that all responsibility would now be removed from her shoulders. For Aunt Anne, when she saw the sick lady, had sunk down close to her bedside, and had cried with pure delight at having found her niece.

To write to Mr. Burlington at once, and to see the doctor—to sit and watch the unconscious face and the restless hands—to utter prayers of thankfulness

Aunt Anne seemed to know now, by the strength of her thankfulness, how deep her anxiety had been; and, when Cyril came and the two stood together at the bedside of the brilliant girl whose brightness at one time had been almost an offence, a silent pressure of the hand was the only sign of sympathy she could command herself to give, without risking a complete breakdown.

When Aunt Anne installed herself that day at Mrs. Stobb's, the good woman handed her a sealed packet. "The lady's money and letters, ma'am," she said; "I made the doctor see me seal everything, so that no reflections could be made upon me if—if things went wrong."

Aunt Anne gave her a kind answer, and handed the packet to Mr. Burlington.

"Shall I leave it for her to open, or shall I see whether any letters throw light upon her departure?" he asked.

Aunt Anne meditated, and, as usual, could not satisfactorily answer such a delicate question.

But Cyril decided upon leaving the packet alone. The doctor was more hopeful to-day than he had yet been. "She has a splendid constitution," he said, "I believe she will throw off this illness completely; but, unfortunately, it leaves some bad effects."

"Mrs. Burlington, as I believe you have been told, is my wife, and I am most anxious to know what we have to guard against."

Mr. Burlington had shown so much good feeling, so much affectionate anxiety about his wife, that the doctor readily answered him.

"A fever such as Mrs. Burlington has had often leaves great irritability of the brain behind it, and often curious fancies. If she imagines she has done certain things, better let her think so; her mind must

be kept quiet and at rest. Don't argue with her; leave her quietly in possession of any theories, or even whims, she may have. Everything will come right by degrees."

Cyril heard this with some dismay. His wife's illness might not have been, had she not been kept in ignorance all these years, and then allowed to know everything when totally unprepared. But he could not explain his position or hers to the doctor, and he merely bent his head in token of acquiescence. As consciousness came slowly to young Mrs. Burlington, it was found necessary to persuade her husband to keep out of her room. The sound of his voice, his footstep in the hall, threw his wife into a state of agitation. To Aunt Anne it was painful and bewildering, and she sought an explanation from her nephew in vain.

"You had no difference of opinion, my dear?" she asked, in a very hesitating way.

"If you mean quarrel, certainly not."

"Do you think, my dear Cyril, you offended her in any way?"

"Not that I am aware of. I can give no reason for this most unhappy state of things. She gets excited, you say, if you mention my name?"

"Most dreadfully excited. She cries out, 'I cannot see him! I cannot see him!' It is quite difficult to soothe her."

"And, as we are not to agitate her, we must not ask for any reason!" Poor Mr. Burlington was terribly worried by this new and unforeseen complication.

The relief of his wife's recovery and the freedom from the tension of the last few days were immense. Now, he was longing to take her into his arms, to assure her of his love, to try to make her see that her mother's history made no difference to him, and that it had all been forgotten long ago. He had at one time thought her perpetual brightness a sort of heartlessness. He knew now what it had

been to him. Was he to be punished for his dulness of comprehension by having it for ever withdrawn from him?

Returning health changed nothing as regarded Mr. Burlington's relations with his wife. She would not see him, and Aunt Anne was at one moment pitiful and the next full of indignant surprise. Mr. Burlington was in despair. How long was this to go on?

At last he spoke to the doctor about it. "I must remind you of your warning to me about not contradicting my wife just now, of attending carefully to any whims she may have. I have no opportunity given me to do either of those things, as she refuses to see me."

"Ah," said the doctor, looking keenly at him, "Mrs. Burlington left home suddenly. You had no dispute, had you? She strikes me as unusually sensitive, very high spirited; perhaps she misunderstood something."

"She left home suddenly. We had no dispute. I was absent on a visit which she herself pressed me to accept. When I returned she had gone."

"Some strange notion she had taken into her head, I suppose. This illness has been coming on some little time, and it would make her very unreasonable; everything would show itself in its very worst light," said the doctor.

"She was told—she discovered—some facts connected with her mother, and she seems to have taken them terribly to heart. . . . I was not there, and when I came home she had gone, leaving no word, no sign. . . . A friend happened to see her on her way, and followed her, thinking her ill. He fancied her all right when she got to her old governess, and he came straight to me to tell me about her. You know the rest."

"I knew that Mrs. Burlington had had some mental shock; in her delirium she talked a good deal. I will myself see whether I can help you in

any way. These are very troublesome cases," added the kind doctor as he went out of the room.

The professional inquiries satisfactorily answered, the doctor asked the nurse to go down to his carriage for a letter he wanted. He put his hand once more on Mrs. Burlington's wrist, and said, "You are getting on very well now, Mrs. Burlington; very well. Your husband must be very much pleased to see so marked an improvement."

Her pulses bounded and spoke volumes to him. She was looking at him anxiously. "I have not seen him; I do not want to see him."

"There is not the slightest occasion why you should if you prefer not to see him. I suppose he is not a savage husband, or his looks belie him. He looks kind enough."

"He is kind—too kind—but——" Her voice failed her.

"Well, well, well, don't worry yourself; get quite well in the meantime. I'll tell him not to come

near you just now. A message from you will do quite as well. What message shall I give him from you?"

"Ask him," she whispered feebly, "ask him why he never answered my letter!"

Great tears filled her eyes, and rolled over her face.

"I can quite well ask him that," said the doctor quietly; "but I will not give you his answer if it's a crying matter."

Maria hastily wiped away her tears, and lay still.

"Something one does not quite understand in this business," soliloquised the doctor; "perhaps some confession of a little account." And he went to Mr. Burlington at once.

"Letter? I have never received any letter!"

"Well, my dear sir, you will have to humour her. Let her think you did, and make any sort of excuse for not having answered it you can think of. You must not see her just yet; but these violent whirns pass off after a time. I am quite sure it will all come right. Good morning."

All come right! Cyril Burlington, who had never been face to face with a case of this kind in his life, hoped the doctor might be right, but the persistent refusal of his wife tried him sorely. He had done nothing to bring this on himself, except . . . Yes; if he had been open with her, if he had followed Aunt Anne's advice, all this worry might have been spared him.

And so far as this went, he acknowledged that he had been to blame, and was suffering justly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FIXED IDEA.

MR. BURLINGTON was naturally anxious that his wife should be moved as soon as possible to the larger rooms and greater comforts of the house he had taken in the neighbourhood. He hoped much from the change, and he longed to make away with all the paraphernalia of the sick room, all the signs of invalidism which in his mind was associated with the determination of his wife not to see him. It may be supposed that Aunt Anne, finding herself appealed to as an authority on the one hand, and still more urgently entreated on the other was

hopelessly bewildered. There are occasions when the possession of a conscience of any kind is inconvenient; and the possessor of a very tender conscience is not always a person to be envied.

Trying to keep clear of pitfalls in the shape of any prevarications, the poor lady was dumb at wrong moments. Then, finding that she was giving wrong impressions, she rushed into speech, and her speech was not always judicious.

Cyril Burlington tried to bear his position in what he thought the only way. He made no moan to Aunt Anne or anyone else, but it fretted him almost beyond endurance. The separation from his wife showed him more than anything else could have done how much she had changed in his life. He was proud in his own way, but he was ready to sue to her for pardon, because he was so conscious of having underrated her.

He had thought her superficial, and he had judged her perhaps hardly, and now he was ready

to make amends to show her how much he missed her, and to prove to her that he did her justice. With these anxious thoughts her alienation was almost intolerable. Was it too late? He entirely misunderstood her at the present moment. Convinced that she had been a drawback to him, she decided to remain away. She had one great resolve in her heart, and there was but one person in the world she wanted to see—her uncle, Mr. Kingson. Invariably she had found him sympathetic; always had he been just; and now when she sickened at the thought of Mrs. Kingson's flatteries, and the unreal and false position she had helped to place her in, she turned with eagerness to the one human being who never flattered her, and whom she knew to be absolutely true. As soon as she was allowed to face agitating questions, her one prayer was to see Mr. Kingson, and perhaps nothing more tended to complete her husband's mortification than the messages he was cognisant of, which, instead of

coming to him, were all a prayer for Mr. Kingson's presence.

Aunt Anne was at her wits' end. She felt, poor lady, as if life under its present aspects was too much for her, and, though her troubled mind did not betray itself in undue carelessness as to the crimped frills which she affected, or the proper sitting of her lavender shawl, she was all the same unsettled and unhappy, and accepted the position with the vague wonder of one whose life had run on comparatively smooth and easy lines up till now.

Mr. Kingson was thankful to avail himself of the permission given to him to see his niece. He went, gladly ignorant of coming perplexity, full of pleasure only to be able to congratulate Maria upon renewed health, and with a latent curiosity as to what she had to say to him. Her first words, undeceived him. Her first words were a prayer to him to help her to undo the wrong she had unwittingly done

her husband, and to enable her to get away from him for good and all.

"I suppose," she said, "as he has never done anything wrong—and, of course, I never have—we cannot divorce each other. That can only be from some great wrong!"

He was too much surprised to answer her readily. He was also much shocked. "You talk rather lightly of what would be a terrible scandal," he said, looking at her in blank surprise.

"I am not thinking of scandal. God knows I am not thinking lightly. I am thinking of him! You must help me to think for him; what is best for him!" she said, passionately.

"Is he not the best judge?"

"No. He cannot see it otherwise than generously; he was urged to marry me. It was very cruel! A great wrong has been done. I must undo that wrong."

"My dear child! No man would marry against his wishes. You are really talking nonsense."

"I wish I was talking nonsense. Aunt Kingson spoke to him and urged him. And she says what is true. But for her it never would have been!"

"What plans, then, have you, my dear? Supposing that you and your husband live apart, what do you intend to do with your life?"

"Uncle! will you speak quite openly to me? Think how I am suffering because of concealment from me of things I should have known years ago!"

"My dear, I will tell you anything I can tell you."

"Well, then, tell me the history of my mother's life! You know it. What was she? Who was she? and where did she live; where did she die?"

"My dear child, if you get so excited I shall tell you nothing."

"Oh! I will be calm; I will keep quiet; only tell me! tell me everything; did you know her? Oh, tell me all without reserve!"

"I will tell you what I know. But do you remember nothing about her?"

"I only remember being petted—being loved. I remember learning Our Father at her knee. A bad woman would not have taught prayers to her innocent child!"

Mr. Kingson laid his hand upon her shoulder. "My dear, I for one never believed. . . . I always thought that there might have been something in her story we none of us knew. When there is apparent disregard of fixed, established laws, the worst is always thought of a woman. A woman has to be very strong to override prejudices, and a woman without a definite position can never do so.

"Three men loved your mother. Yes! If I am to tell you the truth it must be the whole truth. I loved her deeply, passionately. So did my brother. So did Mr. Wyncote's brother. I candidly own that I never understood why the very worst of the three attracted her, and it is quite impossible for me to tell you how lovely, how graceful, how fascinating she was. She was partly Irish, partly

French; but she had been mostly in France and in Paris, I believe. She was a dancer. Maria, she was in those days, and all the time I knew her, as good as possible. No breath of scandal could touch her. She was never alone, and she received no one. None of us knew where she lived. We three, much together, all adored her. I suppose others did, too. But I pressed her to marry me, and then she told me that my brother had already asked her, and had her promise. She did not look very happy when I tried to master my grief, and offered to be her brother. Wyncote was quite beside himself. He talked of treachery, and he behaved like a maniac. It was still worse when my brother ran away with her, and the marriage was over. I never shall forget the anxiety I went through. I was miserable myself. I knew only too well that my brother was—well, he is dead, and yet I am obliged to say it—a scoundrel. He had no principles, no sense of honour, and he had an ungovernable temper. My

dear child! It is all pain. Let me hurry it over. There came a day when I heard that your mother had fled with Wyncote. There was a duel, and my brother was shot." Mr. Kingson, who had been speaking very quietly, suppressing all signs of agitation for the sake of the pale figure whose eyes were fixed upon him with such an intense and pathetic gaze, stopped.

"And how do you know that it was true? how did he—my father—know? Are you sure?"

"I could only believe what my poor brother told me. It was true that she was seen travelling with Wyncote. Since then I have inquired no farther; and, my poor child, my earnest advice to you is to let the matter rest. Do not let one wrong mar two lives!"

"Do you think that possible? Do you know me so little?" she said, in a very low voice, keeping herself under control for fear of his leaving her. She had much to ask, much to say!

"But what remains to be done? and what good can you do, raking up a painful story? Let it rest, child! I do entreat you. Let it rest!"

"It is not possible for me. Do you believe that my mother died then, or afterwards? How was it?"

"We do not know. I believe she died."

"You do not know!" Mrs. Burlington half sprang up. "You have all left it so. You do not know; and I, while I have lived in such luxury and comfort, may have had a mother in want." This thought was horrible to her. She pressed her hands together with an inward prayer for patience.

"No, Maria. Your mother was well cared for in one way as far as I could care for her. I knew my brother well, and I arranged that what could be settled on her was so settled. Child, your mother was inexpressibly dear to me, and my love and care for you may have been imperfect, but I would willingly have guarded you—her child—from every sorrow, every trouble."

"I am not thankless," she murmured; "I am more grateful to you than I can at this moment express. You must forgive me! It seems so difficult to think that perhaps—perhaps—I have still a mother!"

"Oh, do not dwell upon that! Do you think that all these years she would have made no sign? If you knew how for months and years I tried to trace her, and then was confronted with one who said she had died!"

"But you did not believe—you do not now quite believe this?"

"I believe either that it is true, or that she wished it to be believed."

"But, knowing her, you do not think she did anything"

"Child, you are hurting yourself and half maddening me by these questions. I could in old days have staked all I had upon her goodness; but what could I think? It was true that Mr. Wyncote took

her away, and that your father fought that duel and died”

“And I refuse to believe that my mother did wrong!” said Maria, in a low tone of passionate conviction. “I believe she lives I will clear her name! Till then

“Tell me one thing,” she said, catching hold of Mr. Kingson’s hand and holding it in a firm and feverish clasp as he was moving to leave her, afraid of the effect of all this agitation and excitement upon her, and yet glad now that she knew everything—“tell me whether you enclosed my note to my husband?”

“Of course I did.”

“And he got yours. Strange,” she murmured. “I have only one more question to ask you, and then, dear, dear kind uncle, you need never speak of this again. Tell me about the time when Mr. Burlington wished to marry me. How was it? Was he very, very much in love with me, and so did not mind my story? How was it?”

Poor Mr. Kingson might have answered that he did not in the very least understand the first part of the engagement, which, indeed, had always been a surprise to him. It is a pity that when a woman like Mrs. Kingson makes everyone dance to her playing she does not take sufficient pains to conceal the machinery she has used when the object is attained. Viewing a successful plan when all is over is like seeing the empty stage with the glamour of light and music gone, and a yawning trapdoor with no fairies in sight—nothing but a square dark hole visible. Mr. Kingson was a man who could not put things prettily or well, and his wife was always intensely mortified by this trait in his character. He could speak the truth—what he believed to be the truth; but he could not study his listeners and tell things “nicely.” “Well, my dear child,” he said, slowly, anxious to say what he knew, and not to make things better or worse, “when you fell in love with your excellent husband I was sur-

prised, because you were—well, such a brilliant personage, and he was older a good deal, and graver, and . . . well, not as brilliant.”

“You were surprised I fell in love. I suppose Mr. Burlington was told I was in love with him?”

“I believe he was allowed to know this. He is, as you know, a man who has no vanity; and Mrs. Kingson said he was quite touched, and, of course, awfully pleased and all that, very naturally.”

“And he knew all about me?” the poor girl said, in a low voice—“about my mother?”

“Not at first, my dearest child. Mrs. Kingson, indeed, thought me very stupid for telling him, and to please her I only told him two or three days . . . I forget when, but not very long before the wedding. He was very much upset, but very kind, and said it would make no difference. Then we talked about telling you, and he said that, as you knew nothing, to leave it so; so few people knew the story. So, you see, he thought as Mrs. Kingson did. His aunt

agreed with me. I thought you should know all about it; that it was not just to you, and it was putting you in a false position."

"You were right. Oh! it was cruel, very cruel; but I know he meant it kindly," she added, gently.

She was looking very white; and Mr. Kingson said "Good-bye," and insisted on going away. As he bent over her to kiss her, she put her arms round him and kissed him as she had never done before.

"Don't worry over it all," he said, kindly. "Try to rest, my dear child."

He creaked out of the room (his boots always seemed to creak). The sound made Maria almost hysterical. How often she had laughed at him and privately despised him for clinging to a cheap shoemaker whose imperfectly laid soles made music wherever he went; and now could she ever dare to laugh again at any of his peculiarities? The sound of his boots would always be to her, as all else connected with him, sacred. Then, though it

was dusk, she put her hands over her face so that the vivid, shamed blush might be hid even from that fading light. This was how Mrs. Kingson had managed! She told herself, and she had once said it to her husband, that some one had "lied" to her. But she had never, never guessed the depth of her humiliation or the extent of that lie.

So her husband had been told that she was in love with him. She had been thrown at him. He had been tricked in every way. Her story was withheld till so near the marriage that it had to go on.

And he had never by act or deed shown what he must have thought of it all. He knew she was ignorant, but how had she acted?

Then another thought sent burning tears down her face. "I am glad my child died," she said in a whisper. "My mind is made up. Till my mother is clear before the world I will not go back to him. He shall be free—as free as I can make him. Go

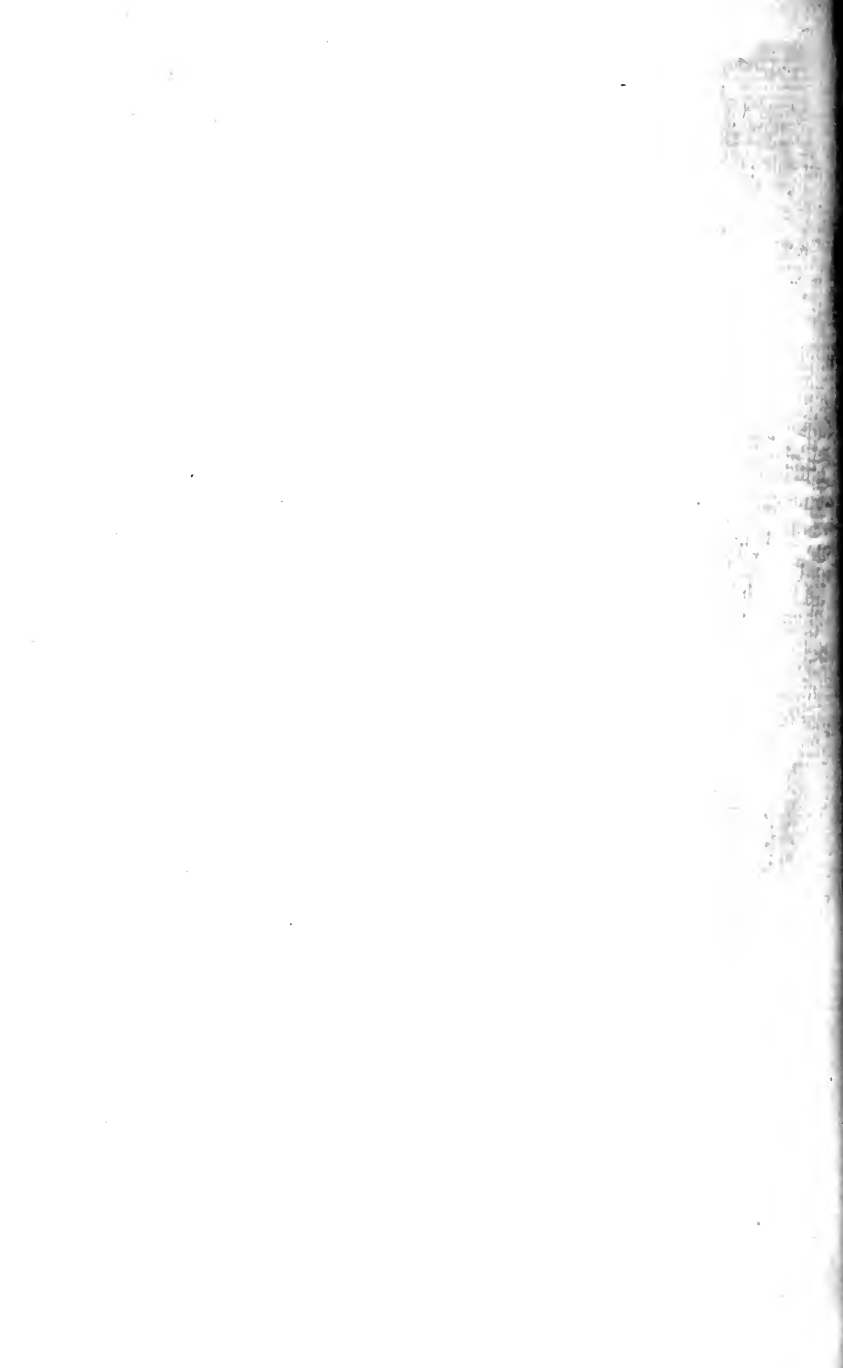
back to see scorn in the faces of some of those around me, compassion in others; to feel that I took a stand I had no right to; and that they are entitled to put their feet upon my neck. Never! Never! It would kill me!"

Of the home broken up, of the unhappiness for her husband, to whom she owed so much, she did not think. She was blind to everything but the agony of her own humiliation. And yet she loved and honoured her husband, as it seemed to her she had never yet done. But, because he had been tricked, and she had been deceived, was, she considered, no reason why she should, with her eyes open, avail herself of his generosity.

Her mother cleared before the world, if she was living, honoured if she was dead, she could then avow her love for her husband, and her return would bring no shadow upon his home.







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